Art Heist, Baby!

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Rating:	Mature
Archive Warnings:	Graphic Depictions Of Violence, Major Character Death
Categories:	F/F, F/M, M/M
Fandom:	Harry Potter - J. K. Rowling
Relationships:	Regulus Black/James Potter, Sirius Black/Remus Lupin, Marlene McKinnon/Dorcas Meadowes, Alice Longbottom/Frank Longbottom
Characters:	James Potter, Sirius Black, Regulus Black, Peter Pettigrew, Bartemius Crouch Jr., Evan Rosier, Pandora Lovegood, Lily Evans Potter, Marlene McKinnon, Dorcas Meadowes, Mary Macdonald, Remus Lupin, Frank Longbottom, Alice Longbottom
Additional Tags:	Jegulus AU, art heist au, Modern Marauders (Harry Potter), Marauders Era (Harry Potter), Art museum, Crimes & Criminals, Angst, Cash and Crime but like Classy?, Brief Barista!Remus, Sunshine James Potter but morally grey at the same time, if that's possible, Referenced Source Material but funny, Dark Academia Adjacent, Slow burn but not really because James loves Regulus on day one, Time and pacing? I don't know her, no beta reader just straight raw dogging it, Putting this here too Major Character Death, Just to be safe, Rosekiller if you squint hard enough, then it hits you like a freight train, but you gotta be patient
Language:	English
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Collections:	Ongoing fic, insert_a_heart_emoji, who even needs sleep?, Ridiculously well written fics, the best fucking fics ever (wkf9), life changing, harry and the marauders <3, dead gay wizards, fics_that_slayed, Unfinished/TBR Jegulus, wolfstar fics but like also any other fic that sounds mildly interesting, marauders fics that i cannot stop reading despite being in so much emotional pain, ♡ crème de la crème ♡, beqmds l Marauders, ficsreadin2022, jegulus fics, My Jegulus Heart, Jegulus favs <3<3, God tier Jegulus fics, jegulus favs, marauders!, best mauraders fics ☆, moony wormtail padfoot and prongs :), Favorite Wolfstar, i've already read this masterpieces, Gay Wizards Being Gay, gut-wrenching-achingly-beautiful-fics, jegulus has my whole heart, marauders fics i would read again, harry potter <3, <3, i solemnly swear i am up to no good, THIS this is IT THIS IS IT HARRY POTTER THIS, marauders, h0m0sexual, fics that broke me, stuff that everyone needs to read, peachyunies tbr, Just my favorites, Marauders Era, maraudersfics, MY FAVORITE FICS, God-Tier Marauders, my starchaser heart, fanfics that made me feral, I loved these, dead gay wizards from the 70s
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Art Heist, Baby!

by otrtbs

Summary

When James Potter answers a mysterious ad in his local coffee shop, the last thing he expects is to be thrown into a world of white collar crime, but how can he resist when the mastermind behind the operation has dark hair and brooding eyes and promises wealth beyond James' wildest imagination? He would do anything for that boy named after a star, including stealing millions of dollars of fine art.

Notes

Hi everyone! This is my first ever fic written on AO3. I am very fragile and a real nerd about Art History, Jegulus, and the Marauders Era in general! I thought this would be a good opportunity to write about what I love so here I am :) I actually have no idea how AO3 works (I was a one direction fanfic wattpad girlie back in the day ik ik im so sorry) so bear with me. Thanks for reading <33

—> Hello. Me from the future here! In light of jkr's £70k donation to For Women Scotland, an anti-trans group that helped shape the recent UK Supreme Court ruling against trans rights, I'm asking to please keep all discussion of my work(s) on AO3 or with me on Tumblr only.

Please do not post or talk about my fics on twitter, instagram, tiktok, reddit, goodreads, storygraph, characterAI, or in unrelated comment sections.

This is a boundary I'm setting to keep my work from being shared in spaces that may indirectly lead to new people engaging with this fandom via my fics. Thank you for understanding and respecting it. I stand firmly with the trans community, especially the trans women who are most deeply harmed and targeted by jkr's bigotry. Their fight is my fight. <3

—> THIS FIC IS CURRENTLY UNDER EDITING CONSTRUCTION 🚧 THANK YOU FOR YOUR PATIENCE

- Translation into Português brasileiro available: Art Heist, Baby! by starboy_siriusblack
- Translation into Українська available: Art Heist, Baby! by aswkdj
- Translation into Deutsch available: Art Heist, Baby! by Anonym_1

Chapter 1: $mall Bi££s

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

James Potter just likes to think that he's down on his luck. It happens to everyone at some point, right? Down on your luck sounds better than directionless, on the verge of overdrawing your bank account, jobless, 23-year-old. At least, that's what he tells himself as he shuffles quickly into the little coffee shop on the corner, rubbing his hands together rapidly to warm them up. The little bell chimes, announcing his entrance, and his glasses immediately fog up due to the rapid change in temperature.

The scent of coffee brewing is a welcomed one, and James closes his eyes, inhaling deeply and letting the roasted warm smell comfort him in its familiarity. He can hear gentle music playing somewhere from the hidden speakers in the shop, adding to the ambience of the warm little shop.

"Look, I hate to be this person because I love seeing you in here every day I do," the barista begins wryly from the other side of the counter, "but I'm afraid Melting Cup Café and Bakery is bleeding you dry money-wise."

"Remus," James opens his eyes and quickly clears the fog on his glasses with his shirt before putting them back on. He greets the barista with his best, unfaltering, smile. "You have my usual?"

Remus sighs and turns around before placing a large cup on the counter next to the register. Steam wafts from the little hole in the lid and James feels his caffeine headache melt away just looking at it.

"That's £4.09," Remus replies flatly, ringing him up.

James ignores the pointed look as he begins fumbling in his pockets looking for his wallet. "Ah," he says when he finally finds it, pulling it out and paying.

"I almost feel that, ethically, I cannot keep selling you coffee when you have no money and no job," Remus shakes his head in a last ditch attempt to get James to see reason as James takes his first sip.

"I am working on the job part," James grins reassuredly. "One of these days I'm going to be a millionaire and buy my own coffee shop and then you won't see me in here anymore at all and wouldn't that be sad?"

"You were on track to being a millionaire at that banking job you had before you quit," Remus' eyes shoot up as he looks at his friend. "I didn't feel bad about selling you coffee every day when you worked there."

James takes a minute to blink away the sting of that comment. Remus always thought it was a terrible impulse decision for James to quit one job without having another one lined up.

"You are lucky we are friends, Remus Lupin. Otherwise, I might even be angry at you for bringing that up," James warns as Remus holds his hands up in surrender. "I'm gonna sit over there," James nods at an empty table in the corner.

Actually, the entire café was empty this early in the morning. James always got there a little before opening, and because Remus was fond of him, he would let James in early. Remus claimed it was out of the goodness of his heart, but James secretly suspected Remus was lonely opening the shop all by himself. He had been coming to get coffee from this little place on the corner for almost three years now. For two and half of those years, he would come in, order the same double latte every morning, talk to Remus for a few minutes, and then head off to his incredibly boring, insanely mundane, soul-killing bank job. Over the years, James and Remus developed a friendship that both of them thoroughly enjoyed. That friendship bled into after-work dinner and drinks and soon Remus considered James one of his best mates.

James liked Remus. He was dependable, quietly observant, and incredibly intelligent. He was always ready with a quick quip or sharp remark that James found entertaining. James admired Remus' quiet intelligence and the way it seemed to intimidate those around him. Most of all James admired Remus' determination and independence. Remus worked at the café to put himself through school. He was working on his second master's degree and called himself a perpetual student. Always voracious for knowledge, longing to know, to learn. To study things was to understand them. There was a power in that.

And Remus liked James, despite himself. At first glance, James seemed the arrogant, selfish, douchey type. He sauntered into the café in his way too expensive and perfectly-tailored suit on the way to his banking job and Remus was determined to hate him. However, his plan was quickly foiled as soon as James opened his mouth to speak. He was exceedingly kind, and patient, tipped well, and took a genuine interest in Remus as a person by asking him all kinds of questions about himself. Soon, Remus found his warmth endearing and his optimistic outlook on life a little addicting.

"Nice music," James snorts as he pulls out his laptop, starting it up, while a twangy acoustic guitar melody droned on.

"Listen if it was up to me, there would be nothing but Bowie playing in here, but the owner, Arthur Weasley, came in one day when I wasn't expecting it, and 'Tis a Pity She Was a Whore was playing and now I'm only allowed to play instrumentals," Remus calls back, making a coffee for himself before the morning rush came in.

James lets out a little laugh before turning his full attention to his computer. In the last six months, this had become a new routine of his. Instead of getting his coffee and rushing off to the bank, he now got his coffee and sits at a table searching for jobs and making Remus' life a little more difficult. In all honesty, he was on track to making an ungodly amount of money at the bank. He was up for a promotion in a few months and would be made head financial analyst in a year or so, but he had never hated anything more. Every day he wore the same thing, sat in the same office, talked to the same clients, read from the same script, made the

same promises. There was no excitement, no action, no fun. James desperately missed having fun. All that awaited him at that job were long hours and fluorescent lights that gave him migraines. He would've gone crazy if he had to spend the rest of his life there, doing that same job every day on a loop.

The loop had to be ended, and to Remus' credit, it was an impulsive decision for James to quit in the middle of a conference meeting. One minute he was clicking his pen mindlessly, feeling his brain rotting inside his skull from lack of stimulation, and the next he was packing his things and walking out the door muttering a quick, "I quit," behind his back. It felt good in the moment. James was flooded with absolute relief and excitement about the endless possibilities of the future, but that was six months ago. Now, James was desperately low on funds to pay for his flat, his groceries, and his daily caffeine intake. The only good thing about his old banking job was that it provided a comfortability James had gotten used to. He had money to buy lavish and extreme gifts for his friends whenever he felt like it, he could pay for everyone's dinner, and buy them rounds of drinks at a bar, and he loved doing it. These days, he could only afford a diet of pot noodles. Perhaps Remus had a point.

Any other person would be reasonably scared. Any sensible, realistic person would realise the trouble the impending financial doom would cause. But not James. He fully subscribed to the belief that money comes and goes, and right now, it was simply just gone, but it would come again. Sure, he was down on his luck, he had been for six months, but something fortunate was bound to happen soon. Until then, he searched relentlessly for jobs online, but nothing seemed suited for him.

James was well-qualified for accounting, banking, business, trade, and finance jobs. He had gone to university, excelled in all of his classes, and understood the intricacies of the market almost better than anyone, but all of the jobs in his field bored him to death. He couldn't shake the feeling that he had made a mistake in choosing that path of education for himself. It was easy, too easy for him. He wanted a challenge. In school, he was interested in sports and partying more than anything and never stopped to think about the day when he would have to get serious about his life. He never imagined himself living past twenty-one if he was being completely honest with himself, and now that he had, he wished he hadn't picked finance to study. Any of the other jobs that didn't focus on business and finance paid criminally low salaries. Even as optimistic as James was, he knew it wouldn't be enough for him to get by.

What he really wanted was a job willing to pay him millions to use his finance degree in an exciting way. He wanted a job that got his heart pumping, and his adrenaline coursing. But mixing danger with finance seemed impossible. It didn't stop James from looking though.

He had been quietly working at that little wooden table for a few hours, filling out application after application, responding to rejection emails from companies letting him know they decided to go in a different direction when a man walked in that caught his eye. He was lanky and wore a shrewd expression. Everything about him screamed intrigue. From the dark sunglasses covering his eyes in winter to his all-black ensemble, the man looked out of place for The Melting Cup Cafe. He moved as if he was trying not to draw any attention to himself at all. His face was set in quiet determination, and he slipped in among a large incoming crowd, stapled something to the corkboard at the front of the shop, and slipped out without a word.

James looks at the place he was for a few moments after he left, his eyebrows furrowed in slight confusion and curiosity before he gets up to examine the paper the stranger had put up on the board. There were several fliers already tacked up haphazardly. Some advertised odd jobs like lawn mowing and gardening services, dog walkers, and babysitters. Other fliers promoted local bands and businesses or events going on around the area. However, the paper he was interested in was stapled right in the middle of the board in bold, capital letters. It read:

'LUCRATIVE JOB OPPORTUNITY

POTENTIAL TO MAKE £ £ £

TAKE A NUMBER AND CALL FOR MORE INFO'

Incredibly vague and yet entirely interesting. James rips off a contact number at the bottom of the flyer and sticks it in his pocket before turning to Remus. He tries to ignore how fast his heart is beating. "What do you know about that guy who just walked in here and put this up?"

Remus shrugs. "Nothing. All kinds of people put fliers up there, but if it looks too good to be true, it usually is." He returns to making coffee for the line of people in the shop.

James stares at the flyer a few moments longer, hoping it will magically reveal its secrets, before he returns to his table to pack up his things.

"Bye Remus, see you," James calls, walking to the door. Remus looks up from the register and gives him a wave.

"I'll text you," James says as the bell chimes for him the second time that day, announcing his exit.

James walks quickly back to his flat, partially because of the cold, and partially because he feels the slip of paper burning a hole through his pocket. He isn't sure why he has such a good feeling about this, but as soon as he saw the man place the flyer up, he felt it calling to him, daring him to investigate. This was it. This was the job he'd been looking for. This was his luck turning around. He could feel it.

He sets his things down as soon as he gets home, kicking off his shoes and sitting on the couch as he pulls out the piece of paper with the phone number on it.

He punches in the numbers and listens as the line rings. Once. Twice.

"Hello?" A rough voice comes through the other end of the phone, and James sits up straighter.

“Um, hello." James pauses briefly to gather himself. "My name is James Potter. I’m calling about the flyer you posted in the café about an hour ago.”

Silence.

“For the lucrative job opportunity? I’d like to apply,” James continues, a little unnerved.

“That was quick.”

“Well, I’m a seize-the-moment kind of person. Was it you who put the flyer up?”

“No,” the man on the end of the line snorts. James can hear clicking noises in the background as if the man was typing something into a computer, and he feels the strange sensation that this is a test of some sort. “I’m going to ask you some questions to determine if you’re what we’re looking for. This isn’t an interview. This is to determine if you’ll get an interview. Is that clear?”

The man sounded harsh but bored. James imagines him to be around his own age based on the sound of his voice and pictures him with a stern, heavy brow. He was definitely scowling and smoking a cigar.

“Yes, that’s clear,” James responds, his voice wiry and thin.

“State your name and age please.”

“James Potter. 23.”

The sound of clicking keys ensued over the phone line.

“Would you consider yourself to be a nice guy, James?”

“Sure. I’d like to think so.”

A derisive snort and more clicking.

“And why did you call this number?”

“I uh, I need a job.”

“Clearly,” the man's voice comes out flat and unimpressed.

James has a feeling he is losing this job interview- if that was possible.

Pre-interview , he corrects himself in his head.

“I was sick of my old job. I want something exciting, something daring. I don’t want to be stuck doing the same thing every day for the rest of my life, I want action, I want a life free from boredom,” James expands boldly. He felt nervous about that answer considering he knew nothing about this job and it could very well be another cubicle office job.

“Would you consider yourself a brave person, James?”

“Absolutely,” he responds resolutely.

James was no stranger to bravery. He never cried getting jabs at the doctor's office when he was a kid, he would always be the first to climb the trees, or to speak up in class, or to say something when he noticed an injustice. He confronted the monsters under his bed himself.

More clicking.

“How would you feel about a job that requires travel? Any family depending on you?”

“No,” James takes a steadying breath in, “I’m kind of on my own at the moment. I don’t mind travelling. I’ve always wanted to go to Brazil.”

“And what did you do before? Job-wise that is.”

“I was a financial analyst and advisor at Crockett’s banking and financial firm.”

The clicking on the other end of the line stopped.

“So you’ve had experience in banking, finance, marketing, trade? Creating offshore accounts and things of that nature?”

“Sure,” James supplies happily, glad that the man on the other end of the line seems more interested. “I’m great with all of that stuff, always have been. I can move money, track markets, analyse data, you name it.”

“Can you hold for one moment please James,” the voice asks after a minute of stiff silence.

“Sure.”

Just as soon as he says yes, hold music comes blaring through the phone and James sits patiently listening to the saxophone melody. He thinks about the strangeness of this phone call. He has no idea what this job is, what it entails, or even the name of the man on the other end of the line. Instead of feeling sceptical about these details, he feels exhilarated.

“Hello, am I speaking to… James Potter?” A different voice comes through the other speaker. A softer voice that sounded slightly French. It sounded beautiful, and James feels his breath hitch in his throat at the sound.

“Y-yes,” he gulps, trying to recover. He doesn't know how he knows it, but he knows this person was important. He was the boss, at least the boss of that other guy James had previously spoken to over the phone.

“I’m told you know about money. Financial institutions, the market,” the voice spoke again. It was cool and careful. “What do you know about money laundering?”

“Well there are many ways to do it,” James supplies, willing to tell the man on the other end of the line anything he wants. “Structuring where you break up cash into smaller chunks to avoid reporting requirements. There’s trade-based laundering which involves under or overvaluing invoices. Shell companies, round-tripping, black salaries, bulk cash smuggling.

All sorts of ways to launder money these days, each increasingly hard to track. But I assure you, I am very well trained, and I know how to spot all the tell-tale signs and protect your company or companies from being targets of money laundering if that is a concern of yours."

Silence.

"Nothing gets past me. I'm very thorough," James continues. "I know a lot about other financial institutions, foreign markets, things of that nature. I was on track to becoming the youngest head financial analyst at Crockett's before I quit."

"Why did you quit?"

James pauses for a moment trying to consider if he should tell this man the truth. He really wants to make it to the interview portion, if at the very least, to see the person behind the voice. "I was bored. I need something more than a desk job. Doesn't matter how nice the desk is."

There was a long pause and James wonders if the line has suddenly gone dead without him realising.

"Are you available to come in tomorrow for an interview," the man speaks at last.

"Yes," James breathes quickly, feeling a flood of excitement and relief hit him at once.

"Do you have a pen and paper? I'm going to give you an address and a time."

James jumps up quickly, running to grab a pen, as he uses one of the overdue notices he's received recently as scratch paper. Quickly he jots down the information.

"Um, what is that job for? O-or about if you don't mind me asking? I'm still not sure what I'm interviewing for? Do I need to bring my resume with me? A cover letter? Also, I didn't catch your name or the company name. The flyer details were sparse."

"They were sparse for a reason. I'll see you tomorrow James. If you do well enough, then I'll tell you more about the job, but there's no need to tell you anything unless I'm sure you'll be the right fit for us," the man explains briskly. "But I am sure we could have great use for you here. You sound… promising."

"Can I at least get your name," James asks again sounding rather desperate. "I feel like I'm floundering in the dark here."

"Regulus," the voice answers shortly. "See you tomorrow."

The line goes dead.

James puts his phone down and immediately grabs his laptop. He types in Regulus into the search bar and goes through hundreds of articles, social media profiles, and even blog posts to no avail. He wastes fruitless hours none the wiser. He can't do much with a first name, no matter how unique it is. In fact, he has learned a great deal about astronomy from the name Regulus, a lot about the star, but nothing at all about the person.

Regulus, he thinks to himself. It was a beautiful name, an interesting name. For the first time in his life, James understands Remus' need to learn. His desire to always know more, his incessant curiosity. James wants to know everything about Regulus, who he is, what he does, what he likes, and why he has the star's name.

Any normal person wouldn't go to the interview tomorrow. Any sensible person would be sketched out by the mysterious and vague nature of the job position. But James wasn't just anyone. James was on the hunt for adventure, and this seemed like the perfect place to start.

Regulus, he thinks to himself again. And again. And again. Until the sun sets and he clamours into bed, almost too anxious about his job interview and meeting this mysterious Regulus to fall asleep. Almost.

When he finally does fall asleep he dreams of constellations and shooting stars, deep forests, and grey skies.

Chapter End Notes

James Potter is something, that is so personal to me. I'll try to update every week, but if I can write the chapters sooner than that, I will post them! But at least once a week there should be a chapter up and out :) That's all lovelies!

Chapter 2: Welcome to the Team

Chapter Summary

James has a job interview.

Chapter Notes

tw: guns (not fired just used as intimidation) gonna add the warning anyway
Chapter 2 up in less than 24 hours of the first one ayeee

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The next morning is grey and desolate. It's drizzling just enough to wet your clothes and your face, but not enough to be immediately obvious when looking outside. The bell to the coffee shop chimes and Remus shakes his head without looking up from the countertop he was wiping down.

“James, good morning,” he looks up to see James standing in front of him and freezes for a moment. “Okay, what is this? What does this mean?” Remus gestures to James’ perfectly tailored suit. Looking as if he’s been transported back to six months ago.

James fiddles nervously with the cuff links on his sleeves. “I have a job interview this morning,” he explains, feeling his heartbeat pick up at the prospect. “I could really use some coffee to calm the nerves.”

“An interview? That’s great James,” Remus gives him a genuine smile before turning around to make his drink. “Where is it? What’s the job for?”

“Uh, I’m not sure,” James answers honestly feeling a little sheepish.

Remus tosses him a disbelieving look over his shoulder and frowns slightly.

“I answered that flyer that was put up yesterday and they’re being very… secretive about the whole thing. The address they gave for the interview is a bit far out too. I tried to look it up but it was more of a warehouse than a legitimate business.” James glances at the flyer board and sees that two other numbers have been taken from the ad.

“Oh my God James you cannot be serious. They’re going to kill you. You’re going to get murdered and wind up on some true-crime podcast,” Remus scoffs, and James is sure he sees Remus' eye twitch. “And serves you right! For just showing up to a warehouse based on an

anonymous coffee shop ad! You can't go."

"I am going though. I had a pre-interview yesterday over the phone and I passed it-"

"-you can't pass an interview," Remus interrupts flatly. "Don't go. What if it's dangerous?"

"-I think you can. Because I did. Anyway. I know it seems sketchy but I feel like I have to go. Something is telling me this is what I've been waiting for."

"You need to call me when you get there and when you leave. If I don't hear from you in three hours I'm sending the police after you," Remus sighs, knowing it is virtually impossible to change James' mind once it was set on something. He places James coffee down on the counter. "This one's on the house. For good luck. Plus it might be the last coffee you ever drink so I figure I might as well give it to you."

James grins before grabbing the warm cup. "Thank you, Remus. If I die, bury me in this suit okay?"

"Text me as soon as you get there, I mean it," Remus calls after him sternly as James makes his way to his car.

Driving was not one of James' strongest suits. He could drive if he really needed to, but he preferred walking and was often known to laud the joys of public transportation, and not because he didn't know how to parallel park.

He puts the address into the GPS and cursed slightly to himself as he drives through towns and winding roads, sipping on his coffee which was getting colder by the minute. He drives in silence that morning and nervously rehearses his answers to typical interview questions in his head. He conjures up images of what Regulus looks like, each one not doing justice to the voice on the other end of the phone line.

When he finally arrives at the address he was given, he parks on the dirt road and sits there for a moment. For the first time since answering that ad, James has a terrible suspicion that this has been an elaborate prank.

James loves pranks but only when he was the one pulling them off, not so much when he was on the receiving end of them.

The warehouse looks abandoned. It stands against the green countryside as an ugly, seemingly forgotten chunk of metal. There was no way a legitimate business could be run out of this. Determined to get to the bottom of it, and putting his bravery at the forefront of his mind, James sent a quick text to Remus, letting him know he's arrived.

He knocks on the metal door and listens to it rattle. It swings open moments later to reveal a man, a little shorter than James. He eyes james up and down and stands to one side gesturing for James to come in.

If the outside of the warehouse was unpromising, the inside was the complete opposite. There were thousands of pounds worth of equipment. Computers and makeshift office spaces.

Chairs and rugs scattered in various places, files stacked haphazardly in cabinets. The space was a welcomed warmth from the outside cold and lit in hazy yellowish lights instead of the bright fluorescent ones James was used to.

“Regulus wants to interview you himself so,” the man says, beginning to move to the back of the warehouse while James trails behind him taking everything in. “You sit here and wait.” He points to a tufted chair and James takes a seat.

“Nice suit,” the man scoffs. “You come from money or something?”

James looks down at his suit before looking back up at the man. He was dressed in very casual attire. “Well, I wasn’t sure what kind of job this was so I figured it best to come over-dressed.”

The man nods curtly. He seems bored and James could tell by his voice that he was the one who had first interviewed him the day before. “What is this job? You’re not going to kill me or anything are you,” James speaks after a few moments of silence. He tries to cut the joke with a smile, but he feels the unease slowly creeping its way up his spine.

“No plans on murder for the present,” The man responds shortly, not smiling at James' joke.

He sits in silence wanting to ask a million questions but knowing that the man standing in front of him, observing him quietly, won't say anything. He begins bouncing his leg nervously.

“Hello,” a voice causes him to snap his head up quickly. “I’m Regulus, you must be James.”

James’ imagination couldn’t have done Regulus justice in any universe. Of course he was named after a star, he was ethereal. He was pale and lanky, but he had dark hair that hung in curls about his face. His eyes were the kind of green that teetered on grey and he was dressed more professionally than the other man. James was aware that he was staring and springs into action quickly. He stands up and takes Regulus’ outstretched hand to shake.

“Yes, I’m James. Hi,” he breathes out rather softly. Regulus' hands were smaller than his and cold, the metal of his silver rings sent a slight chill through James and he notices a particular ring in the shape of a snake, with two emerald green jewels for eyes sitting on his thumb. It was beautiful. He was beautiful.

“Sorry about the mess. This isn’t where we would be operating out of if you get the job this is just temporary."

James quickly realises that Regulus has already started walking and he hurries to catch up.

“We’re putting together a team and this was the most convenient place to set up for a few weeks.” Regulus leads him to a computer and pulls the chair out for James to sit.

He obliges.

“I hope you don’t mind but this part of the interview is a practical session. I have some things I need you to work through here. Don’t worry, they’re all simulated. So if you fuck up, you won’t get the job, but you won’t irrevocably destroy anything either.”

His slight French accent goes straight to James’ head and he tries to focus on the instructions Regulus is giving him, but his heart is beating so fast being in such close proximity to someone so… someone so like him.

James blinks a few times to clear his thoughts and then begins working on the tasks on the screen. There are a lot of financial accounts set up in different locations, international banking times, banking flags that needed to be cleared, and accounts that needed to be moved or hidden. James does it all, everything Regulus asks of him without thinking, without hardly breathing.

After solving one particularly difficult task, Regulus leans in, looking at the screen with such rapt awe he doesn't even notice James gulp at their closeness. Regulus smelled like Earl Grey tea and amber and James was intoxicated.

“Incredible,” Regulus murmurs, as James desperately tries to keep the blush from rising to his cheeks.

When he's finished with the tasks assigned to him, James spins around in the chair to look at Regulus who's standing behind him quietly. He was in a white button-down shirt, with the first few buttons undone and James imagined unbuttoning all of them right there.

“Well James,” Regulus drags a chair over to sit across from him, pulling James out of his completely inappropriate thoughts. “You have the job if you want it.”

“What is the job,” James asks furrowing his brow slightly. “I don’t understand.”

“What did I just have you do,” Regulus returns, eyeing him keenly.

Another test.

James thinks about the tasks he was asked to complete. He goes over each one in his head until it finally clicks. His eyes widen in understanding.

“Now you understand the secrecy,” Regulus returns with a small smile, also seeing that James has finally understood.

A million and three things are running through James' mind, but mainly a large flashing red sign that was alternating between flashing **danger!** and **mafia!** at him.

“What do you need me to launder for you? What is the dirty money? Where is it coming from? I don't want to be involved in the drug trade or-or,”

“Relax James,” Regulus responds calmly, still eyeing him carefully. He looks as if he was sizing James up, determining quickly if James was friend or foe. “We’re not involved in the drug trade.”

James feels entirely helpless under his gaze. Powerless to move. He wants to sit there and feel trapped under the weight of Regulus' stare for the rest of eternity, to give Regulus everything he ever asked for, even if his brain was screeching at him to leave.

"You are extremely talented at what you do. You'd make a valuable addition to the team. We don't work for cartels, we're more of a freelance business focused on fine arts. You see," he speaks slowly as if he is explaining a matter of great importance to a small child, "I intend to pull off the greatest art heist of the entire century, sell some paintings, and make millions of dollars. I'm assembling a team of highly trained professionals to help me carry out this task. If we're successful then we'd all be rich beyond belief."

James furrows his eyebrows slightly, taking in this information. As slowly as Regulus was saying it, it still took time for James to process through. It was astounding to him that he was sitting across from the most beautiful person he'd ever seen before, a person whose voice alone took his breath away, and he was discussing a crime. A crime that had the potential to land him in jail for a very long time. It was even more astounding to him that he was actually considering it.

"Why an art heist," James asks once he realises Regulus was waiting for him to speak. "I mean, if you want money, why not rob a bank?"

The corners of Regulus' mouth turn up slightly and James feels his heart swell.

Yes. Do that. Look at me like that forever.

"Cliché. Besides, banks are boring. Where's the fun? Where's the excitement in that?"

Yes, James thinks. *Yes, you get it. You understand.*

"But to be in a museum, surrounded by works created by an artist's hand. An artist who lived hundreds of years ago, to see what they saw, and then to take it for yourself? Anyone can steal money, but we're stealing pieces of the past. Portals to another time." James stares at the boy in wonder and in awe as he listens to him speak. Regulus seems to be lost in thought slightly, his eyes sparkling in anticipation, "We're going for the Warhols, we're taking back the Banksy's and Basquiat's. Art is for the people!"

James smiles at him and his enthusiasm. There was something magic about Regulus, he was sure of it. He was almost certain he's been bewitched.

"I have a team of people, if you want the job you'll meet them all, and be working closely with them too. They will be your colleagues, your only friends for the foreseeable future. You would handle a lot of the financial aspects of the job. Foreign markets to sell the artworks, making sure the money is untraceable, the aftermath of the heist. But you'd also be helping with the actual heist itself if needed. If you agree, you would have to follow my rules and instructions. There will be many months of training and classes, you'd leave your home, your life here would be nonexistent, and you'd become untraceable. While you are with me, everything would be paid for. Housing, food, and any and all other expenses."

James was staring at Regulus intently. He watches as the other boy speaks slowly and methodically, trying to memorise every little detail about him. Every curl, every minute expression.

“Obviously what we’re doing is illegal and you would be incurring that risk. You would also be extremely wealthy if you follow through with this plan, and I would think that this could be an excellent partnership if you agree.” He pauses for a moment. “And while I cannot promise you a life free from finance, I can promise you a job that is never boring, a place of excitement, and a lifetime of adrenaline highs,” Regulus seems to be finished with his speech as he laces his ringed fingers together in his lap.

James wonders how he can be so calm discussing a crime like this. James had never done anything illegal in his life. While he hasn't always followed the rules set for him in school, he certainly always followed the law. This didn't seem like Regulus' first time dalliance into the world of crime at all.

James finally opens his mouth to speak. “And what if I decline this offer?”

He hears the gun click before he feels the cold metal on the back of his head. His heart beating rapidly, as his mouth goes dry. He hadn’t even heard anyone walking behind him, he was too focused on Regulus, too enraptured by the boy sitting in front of him. Now the alarm bells going off in James’ mind were more than justified. Danger. Danger!

Regulus continues speaking in that calm unaffected tone, “If you decline, then I’m afraid I’m going to have Evan here shoot you. It’s not personal, you would just be a liability, and we can’t have that.” James was silent, staring at Regulus as Regulus stared back at him, his eyes glinting mischievously. “But something tells me you won’t decline, James. Something tells me you’re up for the challenge.”

The metal of the gun was still placed to the back of James’ head, heavy and threatening. He's afraid to make any sudden movements and he sits as still as possible, terrified that even a slight head tilt will cause Evan to pull the trigger.

“Say yes James, it could all be so easy. Just say yes,” Regulus taunts. He whispers to him, his eyes challenging James, daring him, like a siren luring him into the jagged rocks of the sea.

There weren’t very many moments in James’ life where he could pinpoint a penultimate frame in a series of decisions. A singular moment where he knew he would be jumping off a metaphorical ledge and into a new unknown, a new chapter. This was one of them though. He looks at the boy sitting across from him, the beautiful, lovely boy, who was ready to steal art to own fragments of the past, and he makes the decision to jump.

“Yes. Okay. Yes,” James whispers, still statuesque still and he felt the gun fall from the back of his head. James would’ve said yes without the threat of violence if he was being honest with himself. He would do anything Regulus wanted him to do. Go anywhere he wanted him to go, and as brave as James is, that thought alone terrifies him.

“Wonderful,” Regulus stands, briskly clapping his hands together. “You have a passport?”

“Uhm, yes. I do, yes,” James stammers taken aback by the change of pace as he grapples with the threat to his life.

“Keep your phone on you. I’ll contact you when I need you. And the address of this place that you wrote down? Burn it. Also, erase it from your GPS. And this goes without saying, but if you tell anyone about this, I will kill you and whoever else you told.” Regulus looks so fierce at that moment, James believes every word. He doesn't doubt for a second that Regulus will kill him. He wishes that it scared him more, he wasn’t sure why it doesn't.

“Evan will show you out.” And with that, Regulus stalks away, disappearing behind a corner, leaving James to look after him.

“Alright stand up pretty boy,” Evan, the man who had interviewed him, the man who had invited him in, the man who had just seconds before had a gun to his head, puts a hand on James’ shoulder.

“You said no murder,” is all James can think of to say at the moment.

He stands anyway to follow Evan.

“And I stayed true to my word. Do you see anyone murdered here? Any brains blown out on the carpet today?”

“No,” James returns almost petulantly, trying not to shudder at the thought that it could’ve been his brains on the carpet.

“No, so you’re welcome.”

“How long have you been working with Regulus,” James asks as they approached the front door.

“Regulus and I go way back, to our school days. We were always friends. Me and him and Barty. You’ll meet Barty soon I reckon. Regulus has wanted to do this heist for years and years. But we just started seriously working on it about a month ago,” Evan shrugs. He seems to be much more agreeable now that he knows James is working on the same side as him.

“I’m not a criminal,” James sputters out. His thoughts were all jumbled and racing through his head now that he was no longer in Regulus’ presence and pinned down by his slate-green eyes.

Evan lets out a loud laugh, “Keep telling yourself that. Though technically I guess you’re not. You haven’t committed any real crimes… yet. What are you gonna do with all the money,” Evan asks. They were stopped at the door.

“I don’t know,” James pauses for a moment to think about it. “I guess I’m in it more for the thrill of it? Does that sound awful? Money is secondary to excitement. I want to do this to prove that I can.”

“Yeah, I see why Regulus likes you,” Evan sighs offhandedly.

James tries to not let it go to his head. “

That’s why he’s doing it too. Between you and me Regulus is bloody filthy rich. Inherited everything from his parents. His children’s children would never have to work a day in their lives. Regulus just likes proving people wrong I think. He’s obsessed with owning and belonging, always has been. He’s a bit mental. Wants to play God a bit I think, knowing that he can give and take.”

James stares at Evan with his mouth slightly agape, filing all this information away in a private folder in his brain labelled ‘Regulus’.

“Personally, I’m going to spend a lot of it on hookers and cocaine. Try my luck in Las Vegas. They call it the City of Sin. That sounds like the place for me,” Evan was still talking. “Anyway, I’m sure I’ll see you around soon. Oh, and hey,” Evan reaches around to a filing cabinet and pulls out a manilla envelope, handing it to James. “This is the stuff Regulus needs from you. Consider it onboarding. Welcome to the team.”

James nods, clutching the folder tightly to his chest, and before he even realises he's walking, he was back inside his car with the keys in the ignition.

He sends a brief text to Remus to let him know he was alive before he pulls off of the dirt road path, making the long drive back to his house.

He smiles to himself slightly at the irony of it all. Remus said going to this interview would kill him, and Remus Lupin was never wrong. James thinks back to the gun to his head mere minutes before. He could’ve been killed. In a way, he's sure that it had actually killed him, at least to some degree. The old James, the law-abiding citizen, was gone and instead replaced with an unrecognisable man who was willing to put his life in danger for a man he only met once, for a man whose slight smile was enough to make James’ world tilt on its axis.

Oh Regulus, James thinks to himself. *What fool are you about to make of me? How far will I let you bend me until I break?*

Outside, James notices the blurring horizon line where green rolling moorland mets the grey turbulent sky.

Chapter End Notes

James: Be gay
Regulus: Do crimes

Alternatively:
Regulus: Do this art heist with me or I will kill you and not feel bad abt it at all
James: You're so lovely. So pretty. So beautiful.

Chapter 3: What the fuck is in New Hampshire?

Chapter Summary

James meets the team.

Chapter Notes

Three chapters in three days is not the norm for me! It's just because I'm excited I think. This one is also slightly longer than the first two chapters by four pages just fyi. Okay that's all mwah :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Cancel all cards and close all of your bank accounts out. Take any money you have out in cash.

If you have multiple accounts, close them out over a period of days to avoid drawing attention.

Dispose of anything in your flat that will spoil or die. This includes food, plants that need to be watered, and pets.

Pack a bag, a small one, with clothes and other effects. Do not bring any personal items that remind you of home. Leave them behind.

You will keep your flat. When you arrive I will help you open new accounts that automatically pay rent every month to avoid suspicion.

Bring your cellphone and any other device that friends can use to contact you along with your passport.

If there is anyone in your life who will be concerned with your whereabouts, and demand that you see them in person after a few months, then you should meet with them over the next few days and set up some reasons for your impending absence. There are some structured examples of what to say on the back of this sheet.

James pours over the sheets and sheets of paper that are contained in the manilla envelope. They're scattered across the floor of his flat in neat rows and he has read the multitude of demands Regulus requires hundreds of times. In fact, he's spent a lot of his time running

around his flat packing things up, throwing things out, consulting Regulus' notes, and running around again.

Regulus is very meticulous in his instructions. He provides diagrams, fake scripts of possible conversations, packing lists, and various other suggestions. He was, however, less meticulous about the information that James deems most important. Like when would Regulus call? When did his job start? Where was he going? How long would he be gone?

The topic of Remus is another issue entirely. James get sick even thinking about it. It had been a week since James had gone to the warehouse, and per Regulus' instruction, James was keeping up his same routine. A routine which now included lying horribly to his best friend about not getting the job.

James sits in the coffee shop every morning while pretending to fill out job applications and agonises over how to tell Remus that he won't be coming in anymore, at least for the foreseeable future. So far his plan is to say that he'd be away visiting his parents for a week or two. Remus surely wouldn't find fault in that. And then after a few weeks have passed, James could write, or text, or call if he could manage, and tell Remus he had found a job, out of the city, and would be away for a while.

James feels a little stab in his heart at the thought of not seeing Remus for a while, and feels an acute guilt at the web of lies he knows he's about to spin. The only thing that was getting him through it was the idea that James would come back for him. James would come back for Remus, and fund every single degree he wanted to get with all his wealth. Remus wouldn't have to work at all when James was done with this heist; James would pay for him to study literature and classical civilizations and political science and anthropology and anything else Remus wanted to learn. Whether or not Remus would feel comfortable accepting all that money would be another issue entirely, but James would cross that bridge when he got there.

When James begins floating the idea of visiting his parents past Remus, he's more than surprised to see that Remus looks almost relieved.

"I think that's a brilliant idea, James. I think I might actually go on a holiday myself." That's all Remus said.

Perhaps he was tired of having James mope about the shop in his jobless state but had just been too nice to say anything about it. James was trying not to read too much into it.

One week was quickly becoming two, and James is once again struck with the foreboding thought that this has been a giant elaborate prank, until his phone begins buzz in the early hours of the evening.

James snatches it up quickly. He's been checking obsessively every couple of minutes since Regulus told him he'd be in contact. He's turned the volume all the way up and never let his phone out of his sight just in case.

It was a text from Remus:

‘Decided to go on that holiday. I'll tell you loads about it when I get back. Some nice boy named Grant is covering for me in the shop. I think you’ll like him. I’ll tell him to have your coffee ready when you come in tomorrow.’

James reads the message and frowns. It seems like a rather sudden time for Remus to just up and leave, especially when he was in the middle of the semester, but a part of James feels slightly relieved that he won't have to account for his own absence for a little while longer.

‘Don’t worry about it. Have fun and take a hundred pictures!’

James responds to the text quickly before putting his phone down and looking around his flat, feeling a sudden surge of emptiness.

His phone buzzes again not even twenty minutes later. While he saw the message was from an unidentified number, James knew who it was instantly.

‘ Black car out front in ten minutes. Take all your things. Driver’s name is Kreacher.’

James bolts up instantly, running around his flat and checking to make sure he had everything packed. He looks over Regulus’ notes once more just to make sure he wasn’t missing anything, and he contemplates sending a text back to Regulus. He wants to, he *really* wants to, but he can't think of anything to say that wouldn’t sound dorky or ridiculous, so he thinks it's best to leave it alone.

The sun is setting outside and the sky has a slight orange tint to it as James runs outside with his minimal belongings. He pauses for a moment, observing the street before seeing a black car idling a few metres away.

James opens the door and slides into the back seat. It smells like cigarettes and coconut lotion. “Sorry,” he coughs a bit awkwardly. “Are you… Kreacher?”

“Yes,” the man answers gruffly, driving off as soon as James closes the door.

“Kreacher but with an interesting spelling. Like a creature, like an animal but not,” James begins rambling in the back seat.

“It’s a nickname,” Kreacher grunts.

“Oh cool. How’d you get it?”

Silence.

James looks out the window. There's no music playing, which makes James more nervous than the fact that he was in a strange car with a strange driver with a strange name about to steal from a museum.

“So Kreacher, where are we headed?” James asks another question, attempting to make conversation and find out any information he could.

“The airport.”

“The airport? Where are we flying to?”

“I don’t know. I’m just the driver,” He says shortly, eyeing James wearily in the mirror.

“Do you know Regulus well?”

“Been with the family for many years. I know all of them.”

“Right well London Heathrow is the other way so I-”

“-You are not flying commercially.”

“A private plane,” James exclaims, his eyes widening. “This is the height of luxury!”

His first thought was that he’d love to tell Remus about this, and then he felt his mood dampen slightly.

He spends the remainder of the car ride in silence, thinking of all the places the plane could take him. If they were going to be stealing art surely the best places would be Paris or Berlin or Amsterdam maybe. James doesn't know a lot about art, he doesn't know anything about it really, but he always admired artists in general. He admired anyone who could create, anyone who could make something that hadn’t existed before. Artists mixing colours and creating scenes that have never been done before, writers giving words to emotions that everyone feels but can’t describe, musicians creating chords and melodies out of silence. James loved it entirely too much and held on to the idea that it was the creatives of the world who would be remembered through their creations. Their books and paintings and music were all signs of humanness, all pockets of creation that stood to defy death. They screamed, ‘Hey, look at me! I was here once on this Earth too. I loved and cried and sang and danced once just like you. I was here. I was human. Remember me. Remember me.’

They pull up to a tiny private airport, right onto the tarmac. Kreacher stops next to a jet and looks back at James when he makes no move to get out of the vehicle.

“Wait,” James says, feeling incredibly nervous all of a sudden. The sun has set by this time, but the lights on the runway and on the tarmac were brighter than ever. “What do I do?”

Kreacher gave him a withering look. “You get out of my car and you get on that plane. Now!”

James gives a quick jump at the harsh tone before grabbing his stuff and exiting the car.

He stands at the foot of the steps for a minute, all he was instructed to take with him fit in one hand in a little black bag. What would happen if he just decided to run? What would happen if he changed his mind right now? Would Evan come running off the plane to shoot him?

Good luck, James thinks wickedly to himself for a moment. He’d have to have damn near perfect aim to catch him. But ultimately it isn't the threat of being shot that makes James trudge up the steps to the plane, it is the reward of seeing Regulus again that makes everything worth it.

“Going to see your mum then are you?” James hears a shout from the back of the plane before he can register anything.

“Remus?" James stands frozen at the front of the plane looking at the tall, lanky figure of his best friend standing up from one of the seats in the back. As shocked as James feels, he can't help but grin at the sight of his friend. “How’s holiday going then mate?” James shoots back once he collects his thoughts.

Remus opens and closes his mouth indignantly before also breaking into a grin. “You bastard!”

“Pot meets kettle! You took a number from the ad! *You* took a number? You’re here? You’re doing this?” The questions were fluttering around James’ head incessantly. “What are you doing here? What are *we* doing here?”

“I’m sorry, do you two know each other,” the sharp voice of Regulus brought James out of his momentary joy and confusion.

“Yeah, we’re friends,” James answers honestly looking back and forth from Remus to Regulus. Remus looked very displeased at James revealing this information and glared at him with wide eyes in warning.

Regulus didn’t seem too happy either based on the swears he starts muttering under his breath and he suddenly appears to have a massive headache.

“Not our fault,” James turns to the voice that was now loudly protesting. “Barty vetted that one,” Evan points to Remus. “I was in charge of James here. We had no way of knowing they knew each other.”

Regulus waives his hand dismissively and pinches the bridge of his nose with his other. Everyone seemed a little upset, but James is enthralled. He was about to embark on the adventure of a lifetime with his best friend. They were going to make ripples through the entire world. Remus and James. Spies, thieves, cultured art men, legends. Stealing the Mona Lisa... or... something.

“James take a seat please,” Regulus says swiftly. “You’re the last to arrive and we will be departing shortly.”

James doesn't need to be told twice as he walks through the rows of people. There are large plush leather seats and each person sits in their own little closed-off alcove for privacy. There are many empty seats to choose from and James scans the rows as he walks through them.

Evan was at the front of the plane sitting across the aisle from a dark-haired boy with sharp features. James recognises him as the one who stapled the flyer to the coffee shop wall and deduces this man’s name is Barty from Evan’s earlier outburst.

Behind them sits a sandy blond boy, he looked absolutely petrified to be there, as if he wanted the seat to swallow him whole. He lets out a small smile as James passes, which suits his soft features nicely. The seat across from him was empty. James does his best to send him a reassuring grin.

In the row behind him, but across the aisle, sits a girl reading a magazine. She has a serious look on her face and James is struck by her beauty. Her dark hair falls perfectly in tight braids down her shoulders and she looked entirely too cool to even be sitting on a private plane, which says a lot.

Behind her, two girls chatter to each other excitedly from across the aisle. Neither of them seemed nervous or concerned about where they were headed at all. One of them had fiery red hair and freckles. James has to blink a few times to see if she is real. She gives him a wide grin when she notices him pass by and James returns it brightly. The girl she's talking to has dark brown curly hair that bounces when she laughs and dark eyes that seem to find humour in everything.

James was panicking. Why was everyone so hot?

Behind them sits a blonde girl with her hair down in effortless choppy waves. Her nose is upturned and she eyes James up and down quickly as he passes by. No one is sitting in the aisle across from her either.

The seat behind her is empty and located across from Remus, so James takes that one and stores his things quickly. Leave it to Remus to sit in the very back.

“I read somewhere that you’re more likely to survive a plane crash if you sit in the back,” Remus whispers, as if he can read James’ mind. “I’m not entirely sure if that’s true, but it can’t hurt right?”

“Bully for us then,” the blonde girl sitting in front of James turns around to grin at the both of them, her cool exterior disappearing instantly. “That means the two henchmen at the front will go down first.”

“You have so much explaining to do,” James says, turning to Remus.

“And I will explain everything but first do you have any idea where we’re going?”

James shakes his head. “I literally know nothing about anything at all. Except that we’re going to be bloody rich… or we might go to prison.”

“I’ll drink to that,” The blonde girl cuts in again holding up a glass of champagne.

“Where did you get that,” Remus asks, eyeing the glass.

“The little shelf on the side of your seat. Click the button and you'll see a little mini bar.”

Remus and James click the button at the same time and grin at each other when the shelf opens to reveal a bar.

Why did this not feel like they were about to be thrust into a world of crime? Why was this so enjoyable?

“You two need to learn how to be more observant and quickly,” the girl snorts at the surprised expressions on their faces. “I’m Mckinnon. Marlene Mckinnon.” She stares at the two of them waiting for them to introduce themselves.

“I’m James and that’s Remus,” James gestures between the two of them.

A loud cough from the front of the plane causes them all to turn their heads toward the front. Regulus stands in the centre of the aisle, eyeing them all carefully. “This is the team I’ve assembled. Look around closely, because these people will be your only friends, the only ones you can trust for these upcoming months. Things will be made more clear once we get to the house in New Hampshire. We have about a seven-hour flight so you’ll have plenty of time to talk among yourselves and get to know one another, for those of you who don’t,” he casts a wary glance at James and Remus. “All I ask is that you stay in your seats when I take off and land.”

“What the fuck is in New Hampshire?” James hears someone mutter.

“The States?” someone else scoffs questioningly.

“Wait, when *you* take off and land? You’re a pilot?” The red-headed girl interjects from a few seats up.

“No, but I am the one flying the plane.”

At this, a rumble of confusion goes through the aisle. James just stares at Regulus and watches as his eyes flash with amusement. After a moment, Regulus speaks again, “Someone has to fly the plane. I won’t kill anyone, so don’t worry about it.”

“I’m sorry but I do have a really hard time believing in this no-killing situation. Did anyone else have a gun pointed at them during their job interview? Don’t be shy,” Marlene interrupts, raising her hand and looking around the plane cabin.

A smattering of people raise their hands, including James.

“And here I thought I was special,” James says as he looks around.

Marlene turns back and gives him her widest smile, “oh yeah, we’re definitely going to be friends.”

Barty and Evan turn around from their seats, eyes shining in amusement.

“We are sorry about that,” Evan calls down the aisle.

“No hard feelings right?” Barty adds, grinning like he wasn’t sorry at all.

“Anyway,” Regulus cuts in briskly, regaining control of the conversation. “Before we take off, I’ll need you to place your phones and any other electronics you brought with you in the bucket when I walk down the aisle.”

I’d like to see him walk down a different aisle, James thinks stupidly to himself before shaking his head. He has got to pull himself together. This man is a criminal…probably. Or he’s definitely about to be one soon.

“What are you going to do with our phones?” The boy at the front asks quietly.

“He’s probably going to throw them out of the plane once we hit 30,000 feet,” the girl reading the magazine says flatly as she turns over a glossed page. “Can’t have anyone knowing our location now can we?”

“I’ll have them for safekeeping,” Regulus responds. “No one is throwing anything out of this plane. It’s just a necessary precaution.” He makes his way down the aisle and the group begins placing their electronics in the plastic bucket.

He holds the bucket out to James last, and James looks up at him from his seat, staring a little too long at Regulus.

“Hi,” he breathes out quietly.

Regulus seems to be fighting a small smile. “Your phone James,” he rattles the bucket with everyone else's electronics and they tumbled together roughly.

“Right, yeah. Here,” James drops his phone in and hears it thunk against the other ones.

Regulus seems to linger on James just a little bit longer than he does for anyone else, or maybe James was just imagining it. He couldn’t tell for sure.

Before James can say anything else, Regulus walks back up the aisle towards the front.

Remus looks at him with raised eyebrows and shakes his head while James tries to shrug it off casually.

Soon he finds himself engaged in a conversation with Remus about how they both had ended up here. Remus explains to him that he was putting his studies on hold because the coffee shop wasn’t paying nearly enough and Arthur Weasley said they were needing to cut back

Remus' hours. He wouldn't be able to sustain his studies and live on a meagre salary any longer and he was desperate, so he took a number off the ad just shortly after James had.

Remus assumed that James didn't pass the interview and therefore had no inclination of the illegality aspect and Remus didn't bother to enlighten him for fear that Regulus would make good on his murder threats. Hence, the lie about going on holiday.

"I can't believe you agreed to be a criminal," James grins once they finish debriefing with one another.

Remus shrugs, "desperate times call for desperate measures as they say. And desperate people do desperate things."

James almost finds it disturbing that no one here, apart from that one nervous-looking boy at the front, seems to be particularly vexed about what they were going to do. Everyone appears strangely calm and compliant when it comes to committing a heist.

In fact, they all seemed, to some degree, excited about it. Maybe it's because the general morals of society are in rapid decline when it came to fine art. Or maybe it's because Regulus' charisma had charmed all of them and he had a genuine talent for picking criminally compliant individuals.

The plane rumbles to life, taking off and soaring into the sky and James closes his eyes for a second, knowing that he is putting his life in Regulus' hands. His heart beats excitedly at the thought, and his stomach fills with butterflies. If Regulus wanted to play God like Evan had said, then he could certainly play God with James. He would put his life into Regulus' hands again and again. He would give him the power to give and to take that life, his life. All Regulus has to do is ask.

Eventually, Regulus' voice comes crackling over the speaker telling them they were free to move about the cabin, which James finds oddly endearing. He wants to go up there and sit with Regulus, to talk to him about how he learned to fly, to tell him when he was little he wanted to be a pilot because he was always fascinated with flight. He wants to ask Regulus to teach him, he wants to see out of the front of the plane into the vast expanse of sky.

"Alright, so what have you two been in jail for," Marlene's voice breaks James out of his thoughts.

"Jail?" James repeats. "I've never been to jail."

"I can't say that I have either," Remus responds, eyeing Marlene with curiosity.

"Why are you here then? You mean to tell me Regulus just hired unprofessionals to do this job?"

"Hey," James scoffs.

"I never thought not being a felon would make me unprofessional," Remus smiles wryly.

“Look,” Marlene begins, turning backwards in her seat to face them. Her head peaks up over the back of the seat to look at James and Remus as she balances on her knees. “Regulus hired me from jail. He paid for my bail and offered me a job. I’m a thief, obviously, and a damn good one too,” Marlene was mixing up different minibar alcohols in a little cup and talking distractedly.

“I’ve stolen hundreds of thousands in jewellery mostly. Some designer clothes to I suppose, but it’s the diamonds that I really love. Anyway, I got caught because they had alarmed a particular glass jewellery case with a nice emerald necklace in it literally four hours before I went to steal it. Can you believe it? My luck? That particular store and that case. I had done all my research so thoroughly, I *knew* how to steal that necklace. Oh, I was so mad, but then Regulus shows up like my guardian angel or something and says he has bigger plans for me. So now here I am on this plane. I’m one of the runners.”

Remus perks up at this statement.

“He says I’ll be going into the museum, removing the paintings from the frames and running them out to him. How exciting is that?”

James pours himself another drink. All throughout the plane, conversations were taking place between the newly found group members. It seems as if other people found their own mini-bars as well. It was like a mixer of sorts and it made James smile.

“I’m a runner too,” Remus responds finally. “Looks like we’ll be doing most of our job together then.”

“Great,” Marlene mutters, looking put-out. “Regulus stuck me with someone who’s never stolen anything before in his life.”

“And who said I’ve never stolen anything before,” Remus returns, looking at Marlene quizzically.

“You just said you’ve never been to jail.”

“Just because I’ve never been to jail doesn’t mean I haven’t stolen anything before. I’ve just never been caught,” Remus returns smugly. “Besides I’m more wanted for this job because of my precision and my attention to detail. Do you even know the difference between a Monet and a Manet?”

“No," Marlene admits petulantly, "but I assume Regulus would teach me that! Or at least have reference photos for me.”

“And I assume your best idea is to cut the canvas out of the frame with a knife for time purposes too huh?”

Marlene blinks. “And what if it is?”

James listens to this conversation between them like a tennis match, the ball bouncing back and forth across the net.

“Face it Mckinnon,” Remus shakes his head, “we balance each other out. You have the quick hand and I have the sharp mind. We’ll be unstoppable together in there, I’m sure Regulus knows that. That’s why we’re the runners.”

Point Remus Lupin.

Seemingly appeased with this answer, Marlene turns to James. “What about you James, what’s Regulus got you doing?”

“I’m handling the financial aspect of things,” James answers. “Selling these paintings is going to generate a lot of cash flow and we need a way to manage that without tipping off any financial agencies. Tracking the money is how most white-collar crimes are solved. It’s my job to make sure we have open markets for selling and accounts to distribute the money.”

“Oh a bank frauder and embezzler,” Marlene cooes, her eyes wide. “That’s cool.”

“Not an embezzler. A money launderer. Embezzlement is actually something entirely different,” James corrects but Marlene has already moved on.

“Alright, I’m gonna go meet the other people on this plane. Hopefully, they’re all cool. Imagine being stuck with a dull spoilsport.”

“I don’t think anyone who agrees to be a part of an art heist will be dull,” Remus muses, echoing James’ thoughts exactly.

“Mingle boys,” Marlene chides. “We’re all about to know each other very well around here.”

So James and Remus mingle. They stand and walk through the cabin and introduce themselves and tell their stories to everyone and try to find out as much as they can about the other people they are with. They trade their mini bottles of alcohol amongst one another to get rid of the ones they weren’t fond of and share the snacks they find in one of the compartments of the armrest.

It's through this process that James finds out that in addition to himself; Marlene, Lily, and Dorcas all had a gun pulled on them during their interviews. It was for this reason that Marlene had set out to make it known that Barty and Evan sucked and she hated them. Remus, Peter, and Mary had gotten through the interview without the threat of a gun to the back of their head and Barty and Evan were the two holding the guns.

The cool girl with the magazine is Dorcas Meadowes. She has a serious, no-nonsense attitude that slightly intimidates James. He learns that she was in charge of the technology aspects of the heist. She's tasked with hacking the security cameras, disabling the alarms, and setting up radio chatter and interference. She also has the ability to hack into police scanners and radios and tap cell phones. Dorcas was allegedly incredibly talented in the world of computer science and has only been caught once when was sixteen trying to break into the UK’s student loan government system. Because she was a minor, her record was eventually expunged, and she claims that they had offered her a job upon completion of a computer science degree.

Barty and Evan are by far the scariest of the group. They seem tough and hardened by life and as James was well aware, they have no qualms with wielding guns and potentially killing people. To contrast that harshness, however, they seemed to genuinely enjoy each other's company and liked cutting up quite a bit. They found joy in the chaos and delighted in the absurd. They're the security of the operation, the intimidation aspect, the brute force. Remus considered this ironic as neither of them were particularly built, and they looked more scrappy than well-stocked and sturdy but hey, he was sure many muscular people were frightened by wielding guns so what did he know? James considered them a bit of a failsafe. They were there and only needed if all else went to hell, and he didn't like to think about what their presence on this escapade meant. He was not at all ready to face the potential of violence. He wanted to get in the museum and out with no one the wiser.

Similarly, James was also unnerved by the sandy blond boy who went by Peter. He's a doctor. Their doctor. A medically licensed doctor.

"Well if you get shot running away it's not exactly like Regulus can drive you to a hospital to have them remove the bullet now can he?" Peter says jokingly, but the colour drains from James' face at the thought.

"That's where I come in," peter gives him a nervous smile.

Again, James files Peter under the same category as Barty and Evan- only useful if everything goes completely and devastatingly wrong.

As nervous as he looked in the beginning, Peter did have a calming disposition about him and an ease in his words that James found surprising as well. He expected a shy stuttering mess, but really Peter was just soft-spoken, and not always the best at reading a room, but James didn't mind it too much.

Mary and Lily have the most intriguing jobs in James' opinion. They're artists and conservators. Both of them click instantly due to the love of their profession, and their technical capabilities. Their job for the heist is to create the fakes that would replace the originals paintings. They were to craft painstaking and meticulous copies of each painting Regulus wanted to steal and enter the museum directly after Remus and Marlene to rehang the fake paintings on the wall where the real ones used to be. Lily told James all about the intensive process Barty had subjected her to at her interview, seeing if she was able to determine which painting was forged and which one was real based on nothing but photographs which was apparently incredibly difficult.

Everyone chatters excitedly about what they're looking forward to, and everyone had differentiating opinions on Regulus.

James had finds out through Barty and Evan that his last name is Black.

He rolls that name over and over again in his mind. Regulus Black. Regulus Black. A guiding star in the black night.

Peter describes Regulus as terrifying but fair. Marlene and Mary are under the impression that he is incredibly too pretentious for his own good. Dorcas and Remus think that he's some

kind of intelligent know-it-all but in the best way. Lily claims she hasn't been with him long enough to formulate any kind of opinion one way or the other, and Barty and Evan didn't engage in the conversation about their friend.

James wasn't sure what he thought of Regulus other than that he feels general splendour whenever they made eye contact. He knows that Regulus can be terrifying, but it's that terror that excites James to no end. That unpredictable dangerous nature about Regulus coupled with his steadying calm mode of speech. His unwavering confidence is as if someone told Regulus he could defy death itself, and Regulus walks around like he believes it.

Soon, the lights in the cabin dim, and James assumes it's Regulus suggesting they all get some sleep.

He ambles back to his seat, opening the window and looking out at the vastness of the clouds and stars sprinkled across the night sky. If he knew anything about astronomy he'd look for Regulus' star, but they all appear the same to him.

Remus is engaged in some intense conversation with Dorcas about something James can't even begin to comprehend and he listens to their voices rise and fall. He drifts off into a dreamless sleep, shortly after, listening to the sounds of whispered voices filter all throughout the cabin.

Chapter End Notes

James Potter bi panic on the aeroplane is so real and true. Also Dorcas being the literal coolest one there that James has a little freak out moment abt it? So real and true again.

<3 Marlene McKinnon love of my life <3

Chapter 4: So that's what's in New Hampshire

Chapter Summary

> James just stares at Regulus, like a lot. Like A LOT a lot. Mary and Lily teach you how to age a painting for nefarious purposes.

Chapter Notes

> This is supposed to be slightly chaotic because everything is happening so fast but I still don't know if it's too much and not enough at the same time ahhhhh.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"James. Get up! James."

James' eyelids fluttered open. For a second he stays very still, trying to remember where he is, before the events of the previous day flood back to him and he takes a deep exhale. Remus swats at him again one more time for good measure.

"We're landing soon," he explains as soon as James fixes his glasses which were crooked from sleeping with them on. He looks around for some water, his mouth incredibly dry from the plane and Remus tossed him a half-full water bottle.

"Thanks," James mutters hoarsely while taking a drink.

"Save some for Marlene, she's gonna need it," Remus grins slightly as Marlene lets out a loud snore from the seat in front of James.

"You didn't sleep," James asks, looking at Remus' dark circles.

"Sleep? No, I didn't. Something about being up in the air in a giant metal tube while a pilot who's not actually a pilot flies us over the fucking ocean doesn't do much to calm the nerves and induce sleep," Remus responds shortly, telling James that he's astounded and a little jealous that both he and Marlene had been able to just close their eyes and nod off. Remus wanted to go up and sit with Regulus, not for the same reasons as James, but because he has major control issues. He would be the first to admit it. He wanted to be involved in every process to ensure it went through smoothly. He knew absolutely nothing about how to fly an aeroplane but he was positive that if he was up there with Regulus, nothing would go wrong.

James ignores Remus' sharp remarks and leans over the seat to wake Marlene up, who jolts with a start and nearly punches James in the process. He gives her what's left of the water and she accepts it gratefully, chugging it all quickly.

As soon as they land, a whirlwind of events transpire. They go through customs, show their passports, and fill out declaration forms. All of which set James on edge slightly, but Regulus leads at the front of the group, answering everything with a calm unbothered ease, and James relaxes some as he tries to do the same.

James thinks about how tired he is and about how badly he needs to shower as he's shuttled into cars alongside the rest of the group. The cars are similar to the one that picked James up from his flat, a little more spacious with dark, tinted windows, and he places his head to the cool window watching as he's hauled off into the countryside.

He's in a car with Remus, Barty, and Dorcas. Dorcas sits shotgun next to the driver and spends the majority of the time flipping the radio stations and changing them when advertisements come on, or when someone from the back complains. Barty complains the entire time about how he was dying from hunger and about how much he misses Evan, swearing up and down that they were never meant to be separated like this. Remus has his head propped against the cool glass window and is attempting to get some sleep, though James can tell by his furrowed brow that the noise in the car was preventing that. James spends most of his time upset that Regulus isn't riding with him and wondering how the others were fairing in their vehicles.

"You've got to be fucking kidding me," Dorcas utters when the cars finally slow and stop outside of the house. Not a house, a *mansion*.

They were in the middle of the New England countryside, with no signs of civilization anywhere, and amongst the flat and desolate landscape stood a Victorian-style mansion, partially obscured by large trees. James gapes at the sight as Remus laughs in disbelief.

They all stand in a little group after getting out of the cars, shuffling awkwardly and kicking up dirt. Their belongings are thrown on the gravel at their feet.

Regulus was the last to exit the car, and as soon as he closes the door, the vehicles speed off down the road and out of sight.

"This is my house, *our* house now, I suppose. It's a bit of a grim old place from the outside I'm afraid, but the inside is much nicer I assure you."

"*This* is grim?" Marlene scoffs in disbelief, and Dorcas casts a brief glance at her as she smiles.

"Collect your things and follow me," Regulus demands, not mincing his words as the rest of the group follows behind him. He leads them down large corridors that are elaborately decorated and ornate. Each alcove was a feast for the eyes. Little paintings and statue busts,

old cherry oak and mahogany, walls painted in rich greens, and windows with flecks of stained glass.

“This house is where you will study, you will learn, you will eat, sleep, breathe. This is where we will spend all of our time until I am convinced without a doubt that we are technically perfect and can complete this heist without error or issue. This will of course take several months so get comfortable.”

“Building relationships here is important,” Regulus continues walking into the kitchen. “We are a team, and we need to trust each other almost blindly for this to be successful. To help with this, we will eat every meal together. Breakfast will be here in the kitchen at seven, lunch at noon and dinner at seven.”

“Seven in the morning?" Barty lets out a dismayed groan as Evan shakes his head mournfully.

“On weekends you are free to do as you please,” Regulus ignores him, walking through the house as he explains his rules. The house has three stories. The first floor holds the common areas such as the library, the kitchen, dining rooms, sitting areas, a piano area, the master bedroom, and other alcoves. The second floor is mainly guest rooms with bathrooms and the third floor had been converted into large empty studio spaces.

Everything in the house was meticulously planned and accounted for, and James had a feeling that Regulus has been working on this project a lot longer than Evan had said.

As many rules as Regulus had written in the manilla envelope, he has hundreds more now that they are at the hideout. James tries to remember them all as best as possible. Some of them are practical such as chores that each of them would be responsible for. Who would buy groceries and go to the store for everyone, who would prepare the meals, who would clean. These chores were going to be assigned and changed on a rotating basis. However, most of the rules seem harsh, and designed to take the fun out of everything.

There was to be no drinking or drugs. Regulus wanted everyone to have clear minds and heads.

No one was allowed to leave without permission to avoid drawing unnecessary attention to themselves.

No contact was allowed with the outside world. They were only allowed to communicate with one another.

Classes would take place at eight in the morning every morning. They would be led by Regulus and they were mandatory.

No relationships were permitted among group members. Absolutely no sex either. Regulus thought that it would only complicate things.

James takes a look around the group as Regulus continues rattling off rules. It's becoming apparently evident that everyone is coming to the unspoken agreement to not follow any of them. James grins at this as Marlene rolls her eyes.

He can barely keep up with the pace at which things were happening. Regulus sits with them and sets up various accounts for their lives back in England. He hands them all old-fashioned flip phones with the other group members' numbers already saved, he talks them through a lot of processes that make James' brain hurt. Eventually, he shows them all to their respective rooms and gives the rest of the day back to them. It was late afternoon, and he demands they all be up and in the kitchen the next morning at seven for breakfast.

Jetlag be damned.

Soon they all settled into their respective rooms and disperse accordingly. Evan and Barty raid the kitchen and claim that they will cook dinner for everyone that night, Remus heads straight for the expansive library that was on the first floor, Marlene and Lily go on a long walk around the grounds, and Mary and Peter stay in their rooms, both falling victim to jetlag.

Regulus disappears, James thinks to sleep, so he takes a quick shower before joining together with Dorcas to explore the expansive house. It doesn't take long for them to fall into easy conversation, though, James has never had a problem making friends. He enjoys her company immensely, she's soft-spoken and makes little comments about the statues they pass or the floor tiling.

"Personally, I think this house is massive. What does Regulus do to be able to afford this place? And he's just using it as a hideout," Dorcas says as they explore a large studio space on the third floor. "It's not even like he lives here full time."

"Evan told me he inherited a ton of money from his parents," James supplies, happy to be discussing Regulus, and even happier that he wasn't the first person to bring him up. "Maybe it's their house?"

"Maybe," Dorcas muses, winding her way down the hallway. "He's so odd, don't you think? I think he was a cult leader in a past life the way he just has all of us listening to him."

"He seems like he knows what he's doing," James responds lightly.

"Yeah, he seems a bit like a tortured genius type. A tortured genius cult leader." Dorcas smiles at that and James does too.

"So," she says after a while. They were almost done exploring all the rooms on the second floor and were about to head down to the first. "I noticed you're already friends with Marlene. What's she like?"

That night passed by like a blur for James. At dinner, he listens to Remus drone on and on about Regulus' library and how there were first-edition copies of books there. He also listens

to Remus' strong complaints that Regulus had annotated in margins of most of his books.

In the margins! Could James believe it?

Remus believes it's a cardinal sin to write in the margins of books and he keeps a separate journal to document his thoughts while reading. James knows this because he had bought Remus a few nice journals at Christmas for that purpose last year.

Much to James' disappointment, Regulus doesn't show up for dinner that evening. They all sit in the dining room as a group, even though Regulus hadn't requested they start doing that until tomorrow. Conversations between them are all happening in a flurry with wide eyes and big hand gestures. Barty and Evan make a surprisingly good pasta and salad dish and while it would pair nicely with wine, they all drink water to appease Regulus on the first evening.

Classes begin the following day and no one has any idea what to expect. Upon entering the largest room on the third floor, James notices that it looks different from how it did the day before when he went snooping around with Dorcas. There are desks there now, from an actual classroom, and they're laid out in rows with paintings that line the walls. Something sits at the front of the room covered in a sheet and a chalkboard. The spacious room is now a fully-functioning classroom.

Regulus walks in behind them and closes the door. He's wearing a black shirt and black pants and James follows his movements with his eyes shamelessly, unable to look away.

"Hello everyone, welcome to the first day of instruction. For the first half, we'll keep it pretty easy and light. I want to focus on accents. We are in America now, it's time to speak as the Americans do. That way, when we are out in public, it'll be easier to blend in. If someone hears us they'll think we're American, an English accent is too unique and an easy identifier," He explains.

James looks at Lily who is already furiously copying down notes and does his best not to laugh.

"Right, who can give me an American accent?" Regulus looks around the room, eyes scanning everyone carefully.

Before he registers what he's doing, James' hand shoots up in the air and Regulus' eyes land on him before he gives a slight nod. "Go ahead. Let's hear it then."

Despite never have attempting an American accent before, James opens his mouth and does his best, which evidently isn't very good based on everyone else's laughs.

"That was definitely more like a German Matthew McConaughey," Peter whispers to him with a grin.

"Valiant effort James," Regulus deadpans before turning around to begin with the lecture.

There are many kinds of accents in the United States. Southern accents that differ by region, Long Island accents, and something called a Minnesotan accent. Regulus says, for ease, they

should all practice a standardised American accent.

Class that day goes by quickly and soon they all find themselves falling into a well-established routine. James spends every second desperately trying to get Regulus to notice him but every attempt seems to go unnoticed.

Regulus puts them all through a grinding and gruelling process with classes too. They all take copious notes and review them in their free time, they ask questions, they pay attention. Regulus is extremely meticulous and demanding and constantly leaves the entire group scrambling to keep up with his standards.

They do most of the training together. They go outside some days and practice self-defence and hand-to-hand combat, which was always a favourite of Barty's and secretly James enjoys it as well. They go through millions of slides projected on the walls while Regulus tries to explain to all of them what exactly the artistic eye is. Just because a painting is larger doesn't always mean it's the most valuable. You have to look at who the artist is, how many works they created in their lifetime, and if it was the first of its kind stylistically. Regulus also tries to impress upon them the importance of not stealing the most famous works. The *Starry Night*, while valued extremely high, wouldn't be able to sell as a stolen painting because it was too recognizable. The risk would be too great. They sit through lectures from Dorcas who gives watered-down accounts of common security systems and how to avoid being identifiable in cameras and watch Barty and Evan demonstrate how to load a gun before they get to try it out themselves.

All of these things fascinate James endlessly, and he soaks up as much as he can. Well, he tries to anyway, but Regulus is so distracting. The way he speaks, the way he smiles slightly when someone gets an answer right or makes an astute observation. James drinks in every single second of it.

He's actually in the process of formulating a plan of his own to ask Regulus out on a super informal date somehow. As informal as going out with a criminal mastermind who also happens to be your boss can be. Regulus is elusive and it's easy to hide when the house is as large as it was. The only time anyone ever sees him is when he's teaching lessons, or at one of the mandatory community meals.

Regulus is hardly ever present on the weekends, and it's not like James can just ask him to do something in front of everyone else. Not to mention that Remus is already teasing him mercilessly claiming he has the 'hots for teacher' whenever James stares too long at Regulus or stumbles over his words. James doesn't think that it's a fair assessment considering he's the hots for Regulus way before he became their teacher.

"James, you can come up here and help with Peter's demonstration." It was a demand from Regulus, not a question, and James snaps out of his daydream for a moment, mind racing.

What had they just been discussing? Right, common bullet entry zones on the human body.

James makes his way up to the front of the class where Regulus and Peter are standing.

“Okay,” Peter begins. James stands at the front of the class, flashing his award-winning grin to Marlene who rolls her eyes playfully. “For this demonstration, I’m going to show you what a bullet hole wound would look like upon entering the body and what it would look like upon exit. Furthermore, you all are going to tell me what vital organ, if any, would be struck based on where I draw the bullet wound.”

The rest of the group nods, flipping over the notes were taking on Peter’s lecture.

“Great, James if you could just remove your shirt please,” Peter asks politely. He speaks with the calm steady voice of a doctor. Factual and slightly removed, but not unemotional. James does feel for a moment like he is at the doctor's office being examined.

“Right here in front of everyone?” James grins once more, not at all mad at the prospect of showing Regulus everything he could have.

“Yes, I hope that’s okay. Regulus and I will be drawing the entry and exit wounds with marker on you. It washes off instantly in the shower,” Peter explains with a tight smile.

“Sure Pete,” James shrugs, pulling his shirt off over his head. "Fine by me."

“Whooo take it off,” Marlene cheers loudly while Remus lets out the loudest wolf whistle. Even Mary, not one for the classes usual antics, cackles maniacally while cheering.

James never had a problem with how he looked. He was never embarrassed by his body, which was good, because being awkward as tall and as strong as he was would surely be a recipe for disaster. He waggles his eyebrows to the class and flexes obnoxiously.

“Alright, that’s enough of that,” Regulus says a little sharper than usual. He was very deliberately trying to stare only at James’ face. “Peter let’s get started.”

James stands at the front of the class with his arms outstretched as Peter and Regulus both uncapped their markers. He's hyper-aware of Regulus' position behind him, as he waits silently for the demonstration to begin.

“So here,” Peter draws a small circle on his torso just under one of his lungs, “It’s important to note the difference between entry and exit wounds. An entry wound is small, and only a limited amount of blood would seep out. There will be a ring around it, known as the abrasion ring that'll be red and irritated. Believe it or not, this could actually be one of the best-case situations,” Peter nods to Regulus and James feels him crouching slightly behind him.

Regulus is so close that James can feel his breath on his skin. He places a steadying cold hand on James' back as he draws the exit wound carefully on the other side. James feels his skin light up with goosebumps and gets the feeling that Regulus is being unnecessarily delicate with him.

His hand is cold but it stings like fire. A flame lapping up his skin ever so softly, so tenderly, and igniting every nerve. Each ring on Regulus’ finger, a fiery kiss. James can't even feel the marker on his skin. It's just Regulus.

“Sorry my hands are cold,” Regulus whispers so quietly James could’ve imagined it.

He just shakes his head in response, unable to speak.

“So,” Peter’s cheerful voice brings him out of his daze and just as soon as Regulus’ hand had been there, on *his* skin, it was gone. “James, if you’d turn around please.”

And James obliges, turning around so the class can admire Regulus' handiwork. He stands face to face with Regulus who's looking at him with an indecipherable expression.

James was larger than Regulus, so most of his body obscured Regulus’ frame from the rest of the class, shielding him from their looks. Regulus isn't making eye contact with James thought. Instead, he's staring down at the small circle Peter had drawn on James’ body, and slowly, as softly as he can, he raises his hand and traces the outline of the marker with his index finger.

It takes James all he has not to collapse under the touch. He has certainly stopped breathing and an involuntary shudder of delight wracks through him. Then, suddenly, as if Regulus becomes fully aware of what he's doing, he retracts his hand quickly, like a recoil, and takes a step back.

“This exit wound looks like it caused a lot of damage right? Look at the size of the exit hole compared to the front,” Peter grabs James’ shoulders and was manoeuvres him back and forth. “There’s going to be extruding tissue here, no abrasion ring, and a great deal of blood. Think profuse.”

James doesn't like to think about the probability of him being shot. He doesn't like thinking about anyone in this room getting shot and bleeding profusely. A painting was great, sure, he could recognize that, but it was certainly not worth shooting anyone over. He looks at Regulus and wonders if he would agree with that. Something told him, he probably wouldn't.

“Most of the time, a bullet will travel in a straight line through the body, but if it hits a bone, the trajectory of the bullet is very unpredictable. The shattered bone fragments can also cause catastrophic effects. For the sake of today’s practice, we’re going to assume the bullet travelled straight through. Can anyone tell me what organ was hit?”

“His liver?” Marlene says questioningly before becoming more confident. “Yeah, his liver.”

“Definitely his spleen,” Evan calls out before high-fiving Barty.

“Right on mate, Dr. Evan Rosier is in the building,” Barty adds.

“No. I think his stomach,” Lily calls out.

“Yeah, his stomach for sure,” Mary agrees with a quick nod.

“It is his stomach,” Peter clarifies, “very good.”

“Oh, whatever. It’s not like anyone is going to be shot like this, and it certainly wouldn’t be

money boy James would it?" Marlene slumps down in her seat and grumbles. "If anyone is getting shot it would be me or Remus."

"Aw, you'll get the next one Marlene," Remus coos not at all seeming perturbed by the idea he could be shot.

"I could so be shot," James returns like a child. He wasn't sure why he was arguing this, he actually would not like to be shot, in case he hasn't made that clear. "I mean- it's possible." He wants everyone to know he is just as brave as Marlene is. He could take a bullet if he needed to. he wouldn't be happy about it, but he could do it.

"No," Regulus says quickly, causing everyone to look at him, but this time, Regulus was finally looking at James. "I think we're going to take a break from this today. We'll pick it back up another time. James, put your shirt on."

James likes the class days where they are all together. It's nice, and he's pleasantly surprised at how easily he gets along with everyone. Remus claims it's because James always sees the best in everyone, that's how he was able to make friends so easily. It was just who he is.

There are, however, days when they train separately.

Remus and Marlene have part-time jobs working at a local art museum as security guards. Regulus claims it's so they can get a base-level knowledge of how security in an art museum works, how they operate, what routes guards take, and what to look for. This isn't the museum they are planning to steal from, but this was practical insider knowledge that Regulus demanded they have.

When Remus and Marlene are away, the others meet without them, discussing minimal things that the other two could afford to miss. Sometimes, Regulus sends them off to do other work separately. When that happens, Dorcas works on top secret projects for Regulus, which James was extremely jealous of because it meant Dorcas Meadowes had access to a computer and to Regulus Black. Evan and Barty often go off off doing God knows what and James often catches Peter practising sutures on bananas. Sometimes, Regulus promises James that he will get to work through financial assets and accounts soon, but that is the extent of James' usefulness for the time being.

During these times, he would wander through the house by himself, peeking into empty corners and staring at the paintings on the wall. Many of them seem to be family portraits. All of the painted figures looking stern and imposing, and they had similar dark features to Regulus.

James was in the process of wandering around when he hears Mary's bright laugh coming from one of the rooms upstairs, and he decides to follow it. He goes down the long corridor until he comes to an open door.

When Lily sees him out of the corner of her eye, she waves him in.

James quickly trods through the doorway and looks around in awe. The room is large, with giant windows that bring in streams of natural light. There are canvases and half-finished

paintings everywhere. Easels, tubes of paints, brushes, and a various assortment of other things are placed about the room in an organised manner. Frames and blank canvases of different sizes are stacked up against one another in piles leaning against the wall. Lily and Mary appear to have several projects going on at once, and James can see the little projects of unfinished creations scattered about the room.

“So this is what you two do when we don’t have class,” James smiles. “Been keeping this place a secret.”

“It’s incredible isn’t it?' Lily sighs, looking at James. “I mean, everything we could possibly ever think of is in this room.” Her long red hair is pulled back in a bun away from her face and held in place with a paintbrush.

“It’s like a museum-level conservation room,” Mary agrees, working intently on a painting. James can't tell what it is yet- there are just violet brushstrokes in the bottom corner of the canvas and nothing more.

Eagerly, the girls begin wrapping him into their conversation, discussing the intricacies of their work. The entire room has a sharp, but not entirely unpleasant smell, and Lily informs James that it's something called turpentine.

“Over here we’re trying different processes to age the canvas. We bleached it first-”

“-Don’t worry we diluted the bleach,” Mary cuts in, like this is something James would know to be concerned about. If Dorcas is quiet in her self-assuredness and confidence, Mary is certainly more like Marlene and James. Bold, and unafraid to be wrong. James loves this about her, James relates to that.

“-Yes,” Lily continues. “That gives the canvas a brittle texture. Then we’re going to soak it in umber-”

“-That’s brown paint.”

“-And thinner. Mary also wants to add cigarette butts soaked in water to the canvas but I think coffee grounds would be much better. We’re experimenting with both now to see how they look.”

“These are for the more modern canvases of course,” Mary begins, acting as if this information was common knowledge. “Anything before the 1920s is more difficult to age and replicate.”

Lily nods along as Mary speaks. “For the paintings that require older canvas, we’re better off stripping the paint from a previously existing artwork. Regulus has a bunch of old paintings over there,” Mary gestures vaguely towards the back of the room, “and some more in another room. I guess he picked them up from galleries and auctions. They’re relatively inexpensive that way, considering the artists aren’t well known and the subject matter is flat at best.”

“Yes, Mary has no qualms about stripping the paint to get a good canvas but it always makes me a bit sad. Just because the artwork wasn’t great doesn’t mean it didn’t have value to a

person at one point. I mean someone a long time ago spent a great deal of time on that painting and here we are just… destroying it and painting right over it."

"If Lily had her way, we'd all be hoarders of the mundane," Mary shakes her head smiling at Lily fondly. "I've learned she gets very sentimental about things. Train tickets and bookmarks and plane tickets too, they all have feelings. Out with the old and in with the new I say!"

"Pigments are also incredibly important. I'd argue the most important but Mary disagrees," Lily continues on, excitedly.

"Because artists can always mix their own paints! It's possible that commercially produced paints were too expensive for working artists, especially when dealing with anything pre-Post-Impressionism. I think that accounts for plausible deniability and room for error," Mary interjects again.

James follows Lily about the large room and tries to take in the information that she is telling him.

He loves listening to both of the girls talk. They're so knowledgeable and dedicated to their work that James finds himself excited about it too, despite not knowing anything about it. Their genuine love and passion for what they were doing was electrifying and James is more than content to remain a silent witness to it all.

"Anyway, take Salvador Dalí for instance," Lily gestures to a painting hanging on the wall of a woman who is comprised of spheres against a blue background. James contemplates it with a slight head tilt. "This is a fake, but when you try to replicate a Dalí painting you have to think about the paints that he used. So we know that when he was in Europe he used Lefranc and Bourgeois oils and when he was in America he used Grumbacher oils. Because this painting was done in the Summer of 1952, we can assume he was in Europe and got the proper pigments."

"Dalí was only ever in America long enough to create paintings during the winter months," Mary adds from where she has resumed painting.

"And finally we have to crack the painting a bit. We do that by mixing oil and water textures that crack upon hardening. Sometimes you can mix it with the paint if you want it to look really old and flakey. And then you normally run some very diluted umber over the whole thing to fill the cracks. It makes the painting look like it's acquired a lot of dust and dirt over the years and then you varnish it and boom! You've got yourself an aged painting."

"Of course, there are other more complex processes we do in the in-between steps we didn't cover. Things we have to do to age the wood and the frames and how to make sure the paint doesn't appear or smell too fresh but that would take all day if we got into the minute details," Mary waves her hands around.

"Wow," James breathes out after the grand tour finishes. "This is incredible." He takes another turn about the room and notices the table of solvents and half-stripped canvases that have been abandoned, the paintings on the wall ranging from landscape scenes to portraits to

abstract works, frames and wood cutouts, canvas half nailed to their stretchers, and little drips of paint everywhere.

“It really is the coolest thing I’ve ever gotten to do,” Mary gushes. “I don’t know why Regulus is so intent on a heist. Honestly, Lily and I could live and work out of here and generate fakes to sell at auction for major money. I’d be happy spending my whole life doing that.”

Lily’s eyes widen imagining the prospect. James could see her creating fake provenance for a piece, working on a Pollock drip painting, and selling it at Sotheby’s. What a life that would be.

“Yes, but then you’re left with nothing but the cash. Once you pawn off the fake painting, what do you have to show for it?” James muses out loud.

“I have a million more dollars than I did before,” Mary returns questioningly as Lily nods in agreement.

“No,” James shakes his head. “It’s not just about the money. The heist is about, well it’s about standing in the same place Van Gogh was when he painted those sunflowers right? You’re standing there, looking not at a painting but at a window. Each brushstroke was done by a man in 1887 and you are witnessing the tender care and curiosity he put into every petal and staring at the same vase he looked at for hours while he tried to get it just right. A-and then,” James was stumbling through this speech trying to explain it to himself more than anything, “and then it’s about being able to reach out and pluck it off the wall. All those thoughts, those feelings, those hours of gentle patience and observation, those visuals are no longer trapped in 1887, but they’re right there in your hands and they’re coming with you. They’re coming with you to the present, to the modern day. A-and so there you are, as one person with all the magic, right in your hands, collapsing the past into the present.”

“I couldn’t have said it better myself,” a smooth voice makes James spin around. Regulus is leaned nonchalantly up against the doorway with his arms crossed. His eyes look at James with admiration as he smiles at him slightly. Just the corners of his mouth twitch up, but James feels his heart soar in his chest.

“But you’re still left with nothing I don’t understand,” Mary furrows her brows. “It’s not like you get to keep the original painting, we’re still selling that. So at the end of the day, in both cases, you’re still only left with the money.”

“Maybe,” Regulus answers wryly. “Or maybe you’re left with the knowledge of that magic moment as James called it. That knowledge that you brought the past and present together. That for a brief moment you opened a portal to another time, you held it in your hands, and you claimed it as your own.”

Mary frowns slightly as if she still isn't buying it entirely, but that's okay with James. he knows that Regulus is on the same page as him. That those moments of adrenaline, those moments of magic are what makes the heist worth it. Not the money, or the notoriety that would follow, just those few quiet seconds where you pull the past into the present, you do the impossible, and you prove to yourself that you can.

“You two seem to be making wonderful progress,” Regulus praises the girls, as he looks around the room. “Remember I’m running everything you do under UV light when you’re done though.”

Mary lets out a little groan of annoyance and Lily nods quickly.

“James,” Regulus turns to him, and James stands up a little taller. “Can I speak with you outside? There’s something I’d like to discuss with you.”

James quickly makes his way to the door, giving a quick wave to the girls before following Regulus down the hall. He seems almost unsure of where he's leading James and ducks quickly into an empty room.

“I know things haven’t been the most exciting for you recently,” Regulus begins as James tries hard not to laugh. Standing across from Regulus like this in an empty room was the most exciting thing that has ever happened to him. “‘I’m sorry about that. But you have been doing really well and I know you haven’t gotten a chance to even leave the house yet,” Regulus is twisting one of the rings on his finger over and over again. If James didn’t know any better he would say that Regulus was nervous. “I need to go to a museum in a few days and I was wondering if you’d like to go with me.”

James blinks a few times rapidly. He's trying very quickly to process what Regulus is saying, but for some reason, the synapses in his brain were refusing to fire.

“To get out of the house, and to help with the heist. It’s a heist-related outing,” Regulus explains quickly.

“You want *me* to go with *you?*” James spits out dazed.

Now it's Regulus' turn to blink a few times. When he speaks again his tone is different, stiffer. “Well if you don’t want to go that’s fine. I can ask Dorcas if sh-”

“No! No,” James interrupts quickly. “No. I mean yes. I- yes I want to go. I would really like to go. I-I just meant that I don’t really know how- I don’t know a lot about art, so I’m not sure how useful I would be if-” James begins rapidly trying to salvage the situation.

“-James, you know plenty about art if your speech from before was anything to go on,” Regulus seems to relax slightly. “You’ll be fine. This is a very low-pressure situation.”

He smiles so brightly that Regulus feels like he needed sunglasses just to look at him.

“It’s a date,” James looks at Regulus carefully with a bit of mischief in his eyes.

“It’s a work outing between people who work together,” Regulus quickly corrects in a flat tone.

“Which is why you asked me alone in a room alone where no one would hear and where we would be alone right?” James continues, undeterred. “Did I mention the alone part?”

Regulus opens his mouth and then closed it very quickly. “Sometimes,” he says quietly, “I like to be a little dramatic. Don’t let it get to your head.” Then he spins around quickly and walks out, leaving James staring after him yet again.

It’s too bad James was never exceptionally great at following directions.

Chapter End Notes

First I wanna say that we will finally be meeting Sirius next chapter so don't even worry I didn't forget about him! Also if things feel like they're moving very quickly I will be expanding way more in the upcoming chapters too, it's coming. Thank you all for reading I'm very excited about this!! I WILL give Peter Pettigrew the character development he deserves it's just gonna take some time :P

Finally I just wanna say that my dream in life is to live in a big old mansion in the countryside somewhere with all the marauders and have a no plot just vibes kind of life. okay that's all ily all thanks again for reading <33

Chapter 5: The Mysteries of the Horizon

Chapter Summary

[Enter: Sirius Black]

Chapter Notes

Just a brief note: I take creative liberties with museums and where paintings are and what they are doing. Basically I'm saying all paintings and artworks in this fic are real! But also fake museums with fake collections bc no way in hell would this tiny ass museum in New Hampshire have Magritte's Mysteries of the Horizon painting. That hoe is in Brussels but we are pretending! Thank you all mwah xx

Tw: sexual content in the chapter. Not detailed or graphic by any means but it does get slightly hot and heavy for like 2 seconds so be warned

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sirius Black considers himself a rational man, most of the time. Well, maybe some of the time. Well if not rational, then sane. At least he is sane.

"You're insane," Frank slams his hand down on the table with a loud thunk, pulling Sirius from his thoughts.

"No, I'm not. You look at this," Sirius shouts, throwing down a folder on the table between them. He parses through glossy photos and lays them all out in front of Frank with a satisfying smack. "Two years ago an uncataloged Degas goes missing from France." Smack. "Two months before that, a Mondrian was stolen from Amsterdam. Again from museum storage." Smack. "Two months before that, a Stein print from Scotland. Also uncatalogued."

Frank Longbottom stares at all the photographs in front of him for what seems like the millionth time and lets out a deep sigh, "Sirius, you have got to let this go."

"No. No, I will not let this go because we are going to solve so many cases here if you would just listen to me! I know Regulus is behind these thefts. I know he is. And he was starting small, see? All these works were in storage, some weren't even catalogued by the museum yet, so the stakes were lower."

"We have been over this, we can't prove Regulus was behind any of these! There isn't a shred of evidence that would stand up in a court of law, nothing to even charge or convict

him on, we tracked down those guys in Zurich who he allegedly sold the Mondrian to and nothing! It got us nowhere," Frank explains again, for what felt like the millionth time as he presses a thumb between his eyebrows.

"But Regulus has a flair for the dramatics so he still stole big-named artists. Artists with names that people would recognise," Sirius continues on.

"Sirius, *you* know that Regulus stole the paintings, and as your partner here, I'll go ahead and give it to you and say that *I* think Regulus might be behind the thefts as well, but knowing someone is guilty and actually being able to *prove* it are two separate things. Plus, Regulus has been inactive for two years, he hasn't surfaced anywhere. I thought we'd moved on from this."

Frank Longbottom is more than exasperated at this point as a Sirius-sized headache forms behind his skull. When he signed up to be a part of the art crimes department, he thought he was signing up to deal with looting and theft of cultural property from war or inter-museum conflict. And sure, he was excited about dealing with theft from galleries and museums in general, but he certainly didn't think he would be spending the majority of his time tracking down one person. A person who happened to be his partner's younger brother.

"Regulus has been inactive for two years until now," Sirius says, throwing down another picture.

This picture was incredibly blurry, displaying a side profile of a man- a man who was unmistakably Regulus Black.

Frank pauses for a second. "Alice told you to stop looking into him."

"Yes, well, we'll get to Alice in a moment, don't worry," Sirius waves his hand dismissively. "That is my baby brother. He's resurfaced after staying quiet for two years and I think it's because he has something big planned."

"Where was this taken," Frank asks, his curiosity getting the better of him as he leans forward to get a closer look at the picture.

Sirius has gotten to Frank, yet again. He smiles, "Just outside a private airport in New Hampshire."

"New Hampshire?" Frank echoes staring at the photograph. His eyebrows knit together immediately, already coming up with possible theories of what could be located in New Hampshire.

"Yes, and guess who already talked to Alice and guess who already got approval and guess who's going to New Hampshire at the end of this week on assignment?" Sirius sings out, unable to control his excitement.

"You already talked to my wife? Before me?" Frank sighs again. "You two will be the death of me, I swear."

“Yes, and it’s me and you and the new girl what’s her name…uh…Lovegood. Pandora,” Sirius continues, pacing around the room. “We’re back on the Regulus case, Alice Longbottom signed off on it and this time we’re going to fucking get him. I have a good feeling about this.”

Frank eyes Sirius warily. He seems a great deal too excited for his liking. “I still think having you on the case is a conflict of interest. He’s your brother, Sirius.”

At this statement, Sirius’ face darkens. “You know why I’m on this case. I grew up in that family of thieves. I know how they work, how they operate. Regulus wasn’t just born with all this knowledge you know. Someone had to teach him, and that someone was my father. Who also happened to teach me, before, you know, I left,” Sirius coughs uncomfortably. “So yeah, while it might seem like a conflict of interest to you, I’m the best fucking person for this job.”

Sirius begins collecting the photographs from the table and placing them back in his specially marked folder. “See you in New Hampshire.”

Sirius Black considers himself a rational man, most of the time. Well, maybe some of the time. Well if not rational, then sane. At least he was sane. He was rational and sane except when it came to one thing: his family. And nothing made him more irrational and insane than Regulus Black.

Sirius is no stranger to the craft of the heist. He had been a part of them since he was too young to know better. But then he grew up, and then he got out, and he tried to take Regulus with him, you can’t ever say that he didn’t try, Regulus just didn’t want to listen. No matter what Sirius said, no matter how many warnings he tried to give about how dangerous this life was, and how disposable they both were to their parents, Regulus didn’t care. Sirius tried to stay for him as long as he could, he did try, but then Sirius was almost killed, laying on the ground in a pool of his own blood, in its sticky warmth, and Regulus was there. Their father was there. And they left him. Sirius and Regulus were both young, still children when this happened, but it was then that Sirius made the decision to leave, even if it meant he had to do it without Regulus.

In a way, Sirius is still trying to get Regulus out, still trying to save him. From what exactly, he doesn't know. He can't quite pinpoint it. It's why he dedicates his career to the international art crime unit, it's why he works after hours to track Regulus down, it's why he annoys Frank Longbottom, his partner and dear friend, on a daily basis with talks of finding his brother. Sirius can never admit that though. To the outside world, Sirius acts as if Regulus is a common criminal who needs to face justice for his actions. But most days, Sirius is afraid that his driving force is finding his brother.

That’s how he finds himself stumbling into a small art museum just on the outskirts of New Hampshire a few weeks later. He isn't entirely sure what he's looking for here, he just knows that he'll know it when he sees it. Honestly, he's concentrating on looking for museums that feel like Regulus. Museums with works that Regulus might like, might target, but Frank will lose his mind if he finds out that a feeling is all Sirius has to go off of, so he decides to keep it to himself. Frank is busy canvassing other museums nearby and Pandora is on the hunt at the private airport to see if she can find any more information about Regulus’ arrival.

This museum is tiny, barely enough to cover two stories, and it's nearly empty. An older couple or two pass him by in the galleries, but other than that, the museum is desolate. *Almost* desolate.

Sirius walks up to a Surrealist painting hanging on the wall of a deserted wing in the museum and does his best not to disturb a museum guard who was quietly observing the painting with his hand clasped behind his back.

Sirius recognizes the painting instantly as a René Magritte. Three men in bowler hats standing at different angles, looking out at the same horizon but appearing to be in three different realities. Above their heads hang three individual crescent moons.

Sirius eyes the guard examining the painting carefully, still unaware of Sirius' presence.

God, Sirius thinks that whoever he is, he should be part of the exhibit.

If he were a painting, he'd be the magnum opus. Da Vinci's Mona Lisa, Monet's Water Lilies, Rembrandt's Nightwatch. People would flock far and wide to see him, from all corners of the Earth, to catch a glimpse of his beauty, to bask in his presence. No marble carving could do him justice. No sculpture could conceive such beauty.

"Big fan of Surrealism then?" Sirius asks, as casually as he can muster. He's proud that his voice doesn't waver with nerves.

The guard jumps slightly, startled by Sirius' presence, as they lock eyes.

Remus Lupin considers himself a practical man. He certainly isn't a head-over-heels romantic like James, he doesn't cry at romantic comedies, and he certainly doesn't believe in love at first sight…right? What did love at first sight feel like exactly? Was it possible to feel something you didn't believe in?

The man standing beside him looks as if he stepped right out of a catalogue. He's wearing a leather jacket, his nails are painted black, and his long dark hair is pulled back, showing off his piercings. Remus can see some tattoos peeking out from underneath the collar of his shirt.

Fuck, Remus thinks to himself. *I'm so fucked.*

Remus quickly realises that the man is waiting for him to speak.

"Personally, no," he responds, clearing his throat. "But this one is different," he peels his eyes away from Sirius to look back at the painting, quite proud of himself that he remembered his fake American accent.

You're welcome Regulus.

"Different?" Sirius looks back at the painting too, taking a side-step closer to Remus. "How so?"

Their arms are touching.

“It reminds me of something I read once,” Remus murmurs, looking at the painting thoughtfully. “Something about how we’re looking at the same moon Marie Antoinette looked at the same moon Shakespeare wrote sonnets about. This painting, it’s like, the men are from three different time periods, in the same place, with the same moon. I like to think that they tell the moon all their secrets and she keeps them, all of them throughout the ages, faithfully. It has meaning. There’s no other way to depict the perseverance of the moon throughout human history without a bit of absurd surrealism.”

Sirius continues eyeing the painting as he thinks. “That’s a nice way of looking at it,” he says at last.

“That’s where lunatic and lunacy comes from you know,” Remus adds, turning to Sirius again. “The Latin root is luna. It stems from the idea that the moon has the power to make a person go mad. I think surrealism is fitting then, for this. For the moon.”

Sirius is looking at Remus again too, standing so close to him that Remus can feel the warmth radiating off of him. He has the overwhelming urge to take him home, right then and there.

Sirius seems to be on the exact same page, and the tension between the two rises rapidly. But of course, Remus doesn't have a home here, he has an art heist hideout that is swarming with nine other people currently occupying it.

“You seem to think about the moon a great deal,” Sirius says softly, staring at Remus’ lips.

Remus feels his knees grow weaker as he shrugs. “I suppose. I’m Remus,” he introduces himself by his real name. Regulus’ rules be damned.

“Sirius,” Sirius breathes out, grinning slightly. “This might be incredibly forward of me since we just met and you can tell me to fuck off if you want, but I have the overwhelming urge to snog you right no-”

Before he can finish, Remus takes a step forward, closing the small gap between them, and crashes his lips onto Sirius’. It's desperate. It's hungry. It's electrifying. Sirius leans into Remus and the kiss deepens quickly.

“We can’t do this here,” Remus pulls back breathlessly. “I'll be fired if they see me like this.”

Sirius responds by kissing him again. His hands tangle in Remus’ hair, and Remus starts running his own hands all over Sirius’ body, pulling him closer, frenzied and fanatic.

“Ugh,” Remus pulls back again with a groan after a minute. He pulls out his walkie-talkie that's clipped to the back of his trousers and speaks breathlessly into the radio. “I’m taking my break now.”

Just as soon as he says it, Remus grabs Sirius by the wrist and pulls him quickly out of the gallery and to the bathroom.

Sirius gladly follows behind him.

Before the door can even close, Remus' lips are back on Sirius'. He fumbles blindly, trying to lock the door whilst simultaneously pressing Sirius up against it. It's as if they can't be close enough. Constantly pulling each other in, neither of them wanting, or able, to pull away.

Remus begins kissing down Sirius' neck roughly, relishing in every little gasp and sigh that comes out of his mouth, and then returns quickly to kiss his lips hungrily as if he's trying to taste every little sound.

"God, you're so hot," Sirius practically growls, his eyelids fluttering closed. His hands find their way down to Remus' trousers, fumbling to unbutton them.

"I'm only on break for 20 minutes," Remus sighs into the crook of Sirius' neck, making absolutely no move to stop him. In fact, he shamelessly bucks his hips up towards Sirius.

"I'll be quick then," Sirius whispers, grinning madly.

And that's exactly how Sirius exits the bathroom 25 minutes later with dishevelled clothes and hair, and Remus exits the bathroom fully believing, crudely, in love at first fuck.

"I have to see you again, you have to let me see you again," Sirius follows Remus through the museum like a puppy, not caring if anyone sees him or hears him all but begging. "There's a coffee shop on the corner of this street. When do you work next and when do you get off? We'll go?"

Remus glances at Sirius, his lips swollen eyes were shining brightly.

"Next Thursday. I'm off at four. I'll meet you there."

"Yes," Sirius actually spins around in a little circle. "Yes, you will. It's a date, Moony."

"Moony?" Remus questions with a raised eyebrow.

"Yeah, because you have that whole bit about the moon. I find it really endearing, and something about you makes me want to tell you all my secrets."

Remus Lupin does not blush, he doesn't, but he turns a bright pink at Sirius' words. It's just a coincidence.

Satisfied with the reaction he caused, Sirius smirks again before heading out of the museum. "Next Thursday at four. Don't forget," he calls out over his shoulder.

Remus certainly won't.

When Sirius returns to the rented-out office space, he tries to get Remus out of his head, but it's impossible.

"You look happy," Frank says, noticing Sirius' smile and spaced-out look. "Find anything useful today?"

Oh nothing much, just the love of my life. Nothing on the Regulus-front thought. Shame.

“Um, no.” Sirius shakes his head. “No leads, really. There was a Magritte I think Regulus would like, but the museum was desolate and showed no signs of nefariousness. Also, Regulus already has a Magritte, so I don’t think he’d steal another one.”

“God,” Frank groans. “Pandora better come back here with something useful because we clearly have no idea what we’re looking for here. We’re just blindly stabbing in the dark.”

“Pandora did come back here with something useful,” the blonde girl sings as she floats into the room.

Sirius is convinced that Pandora Lovegood is a ghost. She's pale and whispy and floats into every room she enters with a lethal quietness. She is a little spacey more than most of the time, and incredibly intelligent. She's quick on the uptake too and her mind seems to work on a different frequency than most others, which makes her exceptionally good at connecting dots.

“Oh thank God,” Frank mutters and Sirius raises his eyebrows.

“Sirius is right,” she begins matter-of-factly.

“Ha!” Sirius lets out a yelp of delight, turning to look at Frank with a smug expression. “What was I right about Lovegood? Please, elaborate.”

She takes a seat at the head of the table as she looks back and forth between Frank and Sirius. “Well, I went to the airport today. The one where this picture of Regulus was taken from the security camera outside the premises.” Pandora places the black and white photograph on the table between all of them for reference. “I talked to a few people and they said Regulus came in with an entire entourage. They didn’t know how many for sure, but around eight or nine.”

“Eight or nine?” Sirius repeats, eyes wide.

Pandora nods sagely. “I tried to get customs forms, flight logs, anything, but not a single person does their job properly, or keeps proper records at all. You’d think that with all the rich international types floating through there, they’d at least do their due diligence, but no. No one can even tell me who was flying the plane!”

Frank sits up straighter turning through this information in his mind.

“I’ve already contacted the proper authorities about that, don't worry. But my point is, Regulus is here and he has a team of people with him. Which also means that Sirius is right. Whatever he’s got planned, it's huge.”

“So, what do the rest of the people look like? The rest of the people on his team? Were you able to pull any more security footage?” Sirius is excited now, his heart beating rapidly. They were on the brink of something big. His whole body was humming with it.

Pandora lets out a long, light sigh. “That’s another problem. The only one who was caught on the security camera was Regulus. It seems very deliberate. Like he wanted the camera to only see him. I think he was sending a message. I think he knows you’re here, and you’re watching.”

“Ahh,” Sirius bangs his fist on the table. Damn bloody dramatic bastard. “As soon as I see him I swear to-”

“Okay,” Frank cuts in, now an expert at diffusing Sirius’ anger after working with him for so long. “If he’s with a group that large then they can’t be hard to find right? We should start checking hotels and motels and other places that have large parties in the area, even rental car companies. We can keep casing the museums, looking for large groups, or just anyone English.” Frank begins going through as many ideas as possible.

“And *you,*” Pandora turns to Sirius sharply, "will not be doing anything. We have nothing solid on Regulus, so if you see him, you track him, but you do not interfere. We can’t do anything unless we catch him in the act. Don’t let your temper ruin this.”

Sirius glares at her harshly before giving a quick nod in agreement. “Fine. But you should know that Regulus is too smart for that. We need to check different rental car places that have cars checked out on the same days. Hotels and motels with rooms checked out on the same dates too. That sort of thing. Also, the English thing won’t be good to go off of either. Regulus could’ve gotten his team of people from anywhere. We have to be smart about this.”

Frank, Sirius, and Pandora stay well after the sun goes down, discussing different strategies, and trying to formulate a plan they could all agree on.

Sirius often catches his thoughts slipping, looking forward to the first moment he can leave, go to his hotel room, and think about the boy he met at the museum. The boy who kisses like there's no tomorrow and fills his head with pretty thoughts about the moon.

Remus, on the other hand, stumbles into Regulus' kitchen that afternoon with one thought on his mind: Sirius.

Sirius who iss English.

Sirius whose last name Remus didn’t even bother to find out before shagging him in the bathroom of a museum where he fake worked.

This is the dumbest thing he’s ever done in his life. And what's worse is that he's looking forward to doing it again next Thursday.

He picks up a clean glass from the counter before getting some water from the tap. He needs to take a minute to himself to calm his emotions that are spiraling all over the place.

“Hey Remus, how’s it going?”

Remus spins around to see Peter standing at the kitchen counter peeling an orange.

“Oh Peter, hi,” Remus smiles, so lost in his own head that he didn’t even notice him standing there. “Do you know where everyone is?”

The house is oddly quiet for the middle of the afternoon, even if it is a weekend.

“Ah, Marlene is still out in the other car with Barty and Evan buying more food. Dorcas is off doing something for Regulus, again. I think James is asleep. And Mary and Lily are in their studio as always. You should go visit them up there sometime. It’s really calming to watch them work.”

“Hmm, I think I will do that,” Remus nods taking a sip from his glass. “Have you seen Regulus? I need to give him these back,” Remus holds up the set of car keys in his hand.

Peter looks up at him, eyes widening, before flashing Remus a massive grin. “Yeah, I have. Where were you today again, Remus?”

“Uh, at work? Like always,” Remus responds, confused as to why Peter was looking at him like a little kid with a big secret.

“Mh hm. Work. Just work?”

“Just work Peter. Like always. What’s this about?”

“Oh nothing,” he says lightly, still grinning. “It’s just that, you have a little,” he raises his fingers to the side of his neck, gesturing quickly.

“A little…” Remus trails off looking at himself in the metallic reflection of the toaster on the counter. “Oh, fuck.”

Though his reflection is shiny and distorted distorted, there's no mistaking the very obvious hickey on the side of his neck just below his jawline.

“You’re lucky you ran into me, because I’m pretty sure you’d be a dead man if you walked in there to give Regulus his keys back and he saw *that* .”

“You’re not going to tell him?” Remus looks at Peter slightly anxious as he tries to read his expression.

“Of course not,” Peter smiles, still finding humour in the situation.

“How am I going to hide this?” Remus panics, covering the hickey with his hand.

His mind is reeling. Even if he manages to avoid Regulus for the rest of the day, he won't be able to avoid him for as long as it'll take for the bruise to heal.

Peter rolls his eyes before throwing his orange peels in the trash. “Come on, follow me.”

Remus does as he's told and follows Peter up the stairs and to his bedroom.

Peter's room looks a lot like the room Remus has. The bedding was different, but the layout was the same and so was the wall color. Remus notices a few papers and books on the desk, a half-empty glass of water on the table, and a half-completed puzzle on the floor. In the corner, on a different table, sits the nicest chess set Remus has ever seen.

"Do you play?" Remus asks, eyeing the lacquered board enviously.

Peter follows his gaze. "Yeah. I love it," he smiles softly. "I used to be president of my chess club in medical school. I was really good, not to brag, or anything. Would you ever wanna play sometime?"

"Sure," Remus agrees. "I'm a bit shit at it, but I can always get better." He continues looking around the room. There are posters hanging up on the wall of bands Remus hasn't heard of before.

"Don't tell Regulus. I know he said in his instructions not to bring anything sentimental like this, but I couldn't help it," Peter makes his way to the closed door in the corner of the room which Remus had correctly assumed was his bathroom.

He turns the light on and begins rummaging around his things while Remus stands frozen awkwardly in the middle of his room..

"Ah, here we go," Peter comes out carrying a little tube and a sponge.

"What's that?" Remus asks, as Peter pours some skin-coloured liquid onto the sponge.

"This is concealer. It's a little too light to be your shade but it'll work in a pinch," Peter says as he dabbles on the makeup to the side of Remus' neck with focus and precision. "It'll probably take a few coats to get it fully covered. I'll do my best to blend it out."

"You have your own concealer?" Remus questions, tilting his head to give Peter better access.

The liquid feels cool to the touch and it makes Remus shiver slightly.

"I'm a doctor. When I was actually working at a hospital, I averaged like two hours of sleep a night. On a good week. I needed something to keep the dark circles at bay."

Remus smiles as he imagines a zombified Dr. Peter.

"There, done. Go have a look."

Remus walks over to the bathroom mirror and examines the side of his neck. The colour difference is semi-noticeable from close-up, but the hickey isn't. Peter had worked some kind of magic, and his neck actually looked normal from far away.

"Well, was she worth it then?" Peter asks, leaning up against the bathroom door frame with a grin again.

Remus turns to him quickly, already on the defensive. “Actually, it was a he so.”

Remus squints his eyes at Peter daring him to say something. He can fight if he needs to. He's taken Regulus' combat classes.

But Peter doesn't miss a beat.

“Oh. Good on ya. Was he worth it then? Are you going to see him again? And does he maybe happen to have a hot sister around his age looking for a soon-to-be-rich-doctor-type?”

And then Remus allows himself to smile, genuinely smile, as he lets out a little laugh of delight. He thinks this is what making a new friend feels like. Warm and sweet. It had been while since he made a friend, he had almost forgotten the feeling. “Actually Peter, are you down for a game of chess now?”

“Sure,” Peter smiles, leading them over to the chess table. "I'll go easy on you the first round, let you die with some dignity later."

Remus sits down to play multiple games with Peter, telling him all about the man he met and all about his plans to meet him again.

Peter listens aptly and supplied his own commentary when necessary and both of them get on so well, they don't realise the hours slipping by until it's time for dinner.

The car keys sitting long forgotten in Remus’ pocket.

Chapter End Notes

Also yes I'm back again in less than 24 hours BUT this chapter is shorter than the last one and also I was excited (but actually quite nervous abt this one tbhhhhhhhh).

If you have the chance to look at it, the painting Remus and Sirius discuss and make out in front of is Rene Magritte's 'The Mysteries of the Horizon. It's a personal favourite of mine.

Peter Pettigrew legendary chess player and professional makeup artist to the rescue <333

Chapter 6: How do you like your eggs in the morning?

Chapter Notes

> So I know you're probably thinking, another update? Does she have a life? And the answer is no. And also, last night, after I uploaded the last chapter, I stayed up until 4 a.m. to watch Harry Styles perform at Coachella so I wrote this chapter waiting for him.
>
> Also also I originally was going to make this a double date chapter in the sense that I was going to include the wolfstar coffee date here too, but I decided to postpone that for next chapter which MEANS next chapter is probably going to be hella long and it will take a few days for me to get it out.
>
> That's all for now! Mwah <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“No, booo,” Marlene jeers, giving a big thumbs down from James' bed.

“Hold on, turn around,” Remus instructs, sitting next to Marlene as he makes a spinning motion with his index finger.

James spins with his arms outstretched.

“Yeah, no. Next,” Remus shakes his head, agreeing with Marlene.

“Ah,” James lets out a frustrated groan, as he turns back around and trudges into the bathroom. “This is too much pressure,” he calls through the closed door. “I’m running out of clothes.”

“Put on the white shirt with those brown trousers from before,” Marlene calls out decisively.

James opens the bathroom door a crack and throws out a navy blue shirt that lands on the floor on top of a pile of other discarded clothes.

The door to James’ bedroom is open, but a light knock on the doorframe causes Marlene and Remus to turn their heads to the entryway.

Dorcas is standing in the entryway poking her head in slightly. “Sorry, am I interrupting something?”

The question is addressed to both of them, but she's only looking at Marlene with a soft smile on her face.

“Nope,” Marlene says quickly, sitting up from her slouching position.

Dorcas' soft smile turns into a full-on grin. “Oh good. I was looking for you actually. I was going to watch a movie downstairs and wanted to know if you’d like to join me?”

“What?” James pokes his head out of the bathroom door. “No, Marlene. I need your opinion. You work in a museum. You see what people wear there all the time.”

“No, nope, no, sorry,” Marlene jumps up from the bed. “I’m out. Remus can take it from here. White shirt, brown trousers, trust me. Later.”

James sighs again and closes the door while Remus watches Marlene skip off with Dorcas, their hands brushing up against each other slightly.

Thanks for the invite, Remus muses to himself.

“Wait, I think this is the one,” James opens the door again after a second.

“Yeah, I think you’re right,” Remus smiles watching James saunter about the room, striking various poses. “Is now the right time to tell you that you’re putting way too much effort into a work outing though? Didn’t you say Regulus said it was a low-pressure situation?”

“Have you *seen* Regulus?” James looks at Remus as if he’s grown a second head.

“Yes, nearly every day,” Remus mumbles flatly, but he finds himself smiling. James is practically vibrating and his mood is infectious.

“Then you know,” James continues as he picks up scattered articles of clothing distractedly, “that he dresses impeccably well. I want to make sure I look nice, because he always looks nice. Don’t you think? I think so, and so I have to try to measure up- at least a little bit.”

Remus lets out a little laugh and James looks at him, sock falling from his hand. “I wouldn’t be your best friend if I didn’t say, at least once, that it’s a horrible idea to try to get with Regulus for like a million and three reasons. But I’m not making great decisions right now either and I really, really want to know how this plays out.” He grins at James, eyes sparkling with a bit of mischief.

James blushes slightly. “Speaking of poor decisions, now that we’re done with me, we should go to your room and pick out an outfit for your date with mystery leather jacket man next week.”

“Shh,” Remus holds a finger up to his lips and widens his eyes. “You and Peter are the only two who know. If it gets back to Regulus-”

“-It won’t! Now, are we gonna go raid your closet or what?” James grins at him happily. James was always happy, but especially these days. “If you ever want to wear anything besides a jumper I have plenty of other options I’m willing to lend you."

Remus pretends to contemplate it for a moment. He could actually use James’ opinion. He trusts James more than himself sometimes. “Okay, yeah, let’s go.”

“Okay let me change first, and oh! We should get Peter to come help too,” James claps his hands together in delight. He was dancing around the room to a melody in his head that only he could hear.

“Alright. Alright,” Remus agrees still smiling, letting himself be pulled along by James.

“Where’s Dorcas?” Evan calls from the back of the room. “She’s hardly been in class at all today.”

“Yeah, where is she?” Barty echoes, crossing his arms. “I don’t think it’s fair that she gets to play with all the technology she wants and I’m stuck with a flip phone from 2005.”

Regulus shoots them both a withering look, but it doesn't deter either of them.

“Maybe she’s hacking into Buckingham Palace,” Evan grins.

“Or the White House,” Barty plays along.

“Or she’s trying to reach the Pope at the Vatican,” Mary chimes in.

“Don’t encourage them,” Lily says under her breath.

“She’s nice, but she’s also terrifying,” Barty muses while Evan nods along. “If Evan or I ever go down, you could strap her with a few guns. I think she could take out the entire secret service.”

Regulus sighs heavily. “Okay, I think that’s enough class for today.” He begins erasing the board.

Today’s lesson, while not boring, wasn’t the most interesting either. They were discussing countries with the most lenient laws when it came to art theft, what were the best places to buy and sell stolen work, and the punishment for being caught in different countries.

“You are all free to go. Except for James, I need you to stay behind,” Regulus calls, still facing the board.

Remus casts a knowing glance his way, and Marlene makes a crude hand gesture that almost makes James regret telling her about his not-so-little crush.

“Are you ready?” Regulus gazes up at him, once everyone else has filed out of the classroom.

“Ready?”

“To go to the museum?”

James jumps up from his seat. “Right now?”

Regulus looks at him, slightly confused by the edge of panic in his voice. “Yes?”

“No! I have to change! I have to get ready. I picked out an outfit! You need to give a guy more warning next time,” James blurts out, already heading to the door to change.

Regulus blinks a few times rapidly. “You picked out a special outfit for this?”

James feels his cheeks heat up slightly at Regulus' words. “I uh, I wanted to look nice,” he says a little more quietly than before, pushing his glasses up nervously.

“You do look nice James,” Regulus says without hesitation, staring at him thoughtfully. He says it so softly, his lips barely move.

But that didn't matter, James still screams very, *very* loudly in his head. He was absolutely going to think about this for the rest of his life.

“But if you want to change, I can wait for you downstairs in the kitchen,” Regulus continues, tugging at his curls slightly.

“Yes, thank you. Give me two minutes,” James dashes out of the room quickly and Regulus lets out a soft smile as soon as he is sure James is gone.

Regulus Black has no idea what he's doing. He doesn't need another person to go with him today. This is a task he could manage on his own. In fact, it probably would be better if he goes by himself, quicker, so why did he ask James to come with him? He shakes his head, filing that away to deal with never.

“We’re going to the Braxton museum today,” Regulus glances over briefly at James who is bouncing his leg in the passenger seat. “It’s fairly large considering it’s based in New Hampshire, but they have another branch of the museum in New York as well. It’s on its way to becoming an encyclopaedic museum, but their collection is sorely lacking in a few key areas.”

James is trying to listen to Regulus carefully but he's too concerned with keeping an eye the road, and the steering wheel, and gripping the overhead car handle for his dear life. For all of Regulus’ wonderful talents, James was quickly learning that he could not drive.

“And this is where Remus and Marlene work,” James asks, wincing slightly as Regulus almost rear-ends the car in front of them.

“No, they work at a museum that’s more local and a lot smaller. We’re going to the Braxton to get a lay of the land. The floor plan is identical to the other one in New York. We’re just doing a preliminary walk-through. They have this wonderful Zurbarán there. It’s called the Allegory of Charity. It was originally at a museum in Spain but it’s on loan for a few weeks.”

Regulus' eyes are sparkling with excitement, just picturing it. He's rambling and James loves it. He would love it a little more if Regulus paid slightly more attention to the road though.

"You know the Braxton has over 1,200 pieces in storage in their basement that have never seen the light of day? They never get placed in the gallery for other people to see, they just sit in the basement as museum acquisitions and only the museum employees can access them. Isn't that fucked?"

Regulus veers off the side of the road slightly and James grips the side of the car as tightly, but as subtly as possible.

"I mean, think about all the museums in the world with all that art stored in their basements and off-site facilities. And they just keep buying more and more and no one ever gets to see it. They sit in the dark, in the cold, it's-" Regulus stops abruptly. "Sorry. I'm rambling."

"Don't apologise," James says quickly. "I could listen to you talk forever. I like hearing you tell me about things." He pauses for a second, "I wish you'd tell me something about yourself, though."

James is feeling bold. He holds his breath.

"What do you want to know?" Regulus asks, barely audible. He grips the steering wheel more tightly than before, knuckles turning white.

Everything. I want to know everything about you.

"Anything," James says instead.

"Oh," Regulus thinks to himself for a moment. "Well I'm not very good at talking about personal things, you know it's probably not-"

"-That's fine we can just start small. What's your favourite breakfast food?" James muses.

"Breakfast food? You want to know what I like to eat for breakfast?"

"Yes."

"This isn't some horrible pickup line, is it? Like a roundabout way of asking how I like my eggs in the morning or something? I don't like eggs," Regulus says quickly, trying not to blush as he speeds through his sentence.

"Woah," James laughs loudly. It's a glorious sound. It's loud, and bright, and fills the entire car.

Regulus has the strange sensation that he would like to bottle it up, to preserve it somehow.

"No, it was not like that."

"Oh, okay," Regulus nods slowly, still baffled as to why James wants to know something so mundane about him. "I like orange muffins. There was a little shop near my old place that

used to make them, and they taste like summertime."

James smiles, "Is summer your favourite season?"

"Oh definitely," Regulus smiles back slightly. "Everything is so bright and warm. It's nice." He makes a turn down a new road. "What's your favourite season?"

"Winter," James says decidedly.

"Winter?" Regulus questions. "I didn't see you as a winter person."

"Winter means Christmas. I love Christmas more than anything. I always go all out, I have a giant tree, decorate every little thing, I make gingerbread houses."

Regulus smiles as James speaks animatedly about his favourite Christmas Time activities, and soon they fall into an easy conversation for the rest of the ride to the museum.

James asks Regulus a lot of questions, but all of them are respectful, nothing about family, or the past, and he lets Regulus reveal as much of himself as he's willing to.

James learns his favourite colour is green and he only wears silver jewellery. He likes classical music the best, and he knows how to play the piano. His favourite composer is Tchaikovsky because he always calls for dramatics like firing actual cannons and ringing bells when he performed his 1812 Overture. He has a penchant for classic literature and murder mysteries. He doesn't believe in astrology, but he's Capricorn, which is the best sign, in his unbiased opinion.

James files all of these things away in a special place. He can't quite tell if it's in his head or his heart. Maybe it's both. His favourite thing he learns about Regulus though, is that he loved One Direction growing up. His face is bright red as he says it, and he makes more than a few vague threats towards James if he ever tells anyone. And finally, after James swears up and down that all of Regulus' secrets are safe with him, Regulus reveals that his favourite member was Zayn and he was quite devastated when he left the band. James always liked Harry best, himself.

Regulus answers all these questions honestly, and even feels a little lighter with every detail about himself he shares with James. He doesn't know why James wants to know all of these little things about him. He half expects James to bombard him with questions about the heist, his motivations, questions about his past, but he doesn't, and it was nice to talk about the things that made Regulus, well, Regulus.

In turn, Regulus asks the same questions of James and finds out a lot about him.

For starters, James is much more open than Regulus is, and he shares every detail about himself without reservation or hesitation of any kind.

James' favourite colour is red. He thinks it's the colour of strength. He likes the Beach Boys, which Remus absolutely detests. He let one of his friends in college give him a tattoo of deer antlers on his leg when they were both drunk once because he had been known to prance

around in his day. James only cried a little bit. He's never been able to finish a novel in his life. He loves rugby and football, and his favourite song changes every day. Currently, it's 'No Sleep 'Till Brooklyn' by the Beastie Boys, but if Regulus asks him again tomorrow, it will be a different answer.

Before they know it, they find themselves parked at the museum. James actually has to get out of the car and direct Regulus with his hands to make sure his parking was straight.

Regulus tries his best. At least he's in the lines.

Once they enter the museum, James lets Regulus take the lead. He grabs several maps of the museum and shoves them in his pocket. He walks slowly and methodically through each room. Sometimes, he pauses and counts the number of paintings hanging in a room, or paces and counts his footsteps from one side of the room to another. He comments on the wall colours and the frames. He's keenly aware of the guards, and how frequently they move about and change positions. He fills James' head with little anecdotes about artists and works. He makes James look at the paintings and asks his opinions about them before he let James read the wall text.

"You have to decide what you think for yourself. You can't let some curator tell you what it means for you."

And James indulges him, if at the very least to see the little glimmer in his eye, or the way his eyebrows would come together contemplatively as he bites his lip, trying to see what James sees.

James makes up giant, elaborate stories about the girls painted in the portraits, or the oil paintings of men sitting sternly around a table, and Regulus laughs quietly, thinking how wonderful it is to see the world as James did.

"Wow," Regulus breathes out, stopping in front of a particularly large ocean scene. It's a turbulent water scene with a large boat almost tipped over. The sky has heavy grey clouds announcing an impending storm. The whole painting is done in wide, sweeping brush strokes and James has a foreboding sense of disaster looking at it.

James sneaks a look at the label, reading Ivan Konstantinovich Aivazovsky, *Gathering Storm*, 1899.

"What are you thinking about?" Regulus asks softly after a moment.

"I'm nervous for the people on the boat. It looks like they're sailing right into disaster," James answers, frowning slightly at the scene. "It makes me anxious."

"Hmm," Regulus hums noncommittally.

"Why, what are you thinking about?"

"The water," Regulus whispers. "I've always loved paintings of bodies of water. I mean this one, look how in the corner he manipulates the paint to make it almost clear, but then, as you

look out, you see the gradient of blue. And the white caps of the seafoam on the waves?" Regulus' eyes are scanning almost greedily across the canvas, trying to commit every detail to memory. "And the distorted reflection of the boat in the water? It's phenomenal. He paints it so well. The water is so turbulent, so violent, coming from the ground and sky at the same time. It's strong enough to hold up an entire ship, to drown fleets of men, but soft enough to scoop up in the palm of your hand."

James has long stopped staring at the canvas and is instead entirely too focused on Regulus.

"It's beautiful," Regulus says at last, shaking his head as if he can't fit all the wonders inside.

"Yeah, yeah it is," James says softly, not at all referring to the painting. Then, after a while, he blurts impulsively, "I'll steal it for you."

"What?" Regulus turns to him, now with wide eyes.

"If you want it, I'll get it for you. I know enough-"

"No you do not," Regulus interrupts as he fights a smile. He stares at James with a mixture of humour and admiration. There's a softness in his gaze that James isn't used to seeing, and it fills his chest with warmth.

"Just say the word Regulus, and I'll grab it and run."

Regulus audibly laughs at that and shakes his head.

"Stop that," he says softly. "We should get back, come on."

And James lets Regulus lead him back to the exit, willing to follow him anywhere.

"It's the last lot of the evening. I plan on going late just to watch the end. I can't believe it's going up for auction."

Regulus is in the middle of explaining a painting that's going on sale soon.

They begin making the drive back to the hideout, and James tries his best not to feel disappointed that the day is ending as he watches the road, which Regulus doesn't seem too concerned about as he's too focused on sneaking glances at James.

"God, it'll be so magnificent to see it in person," Regulus smiles. The sun has already gone down and they spent so much time at the museum that the sky was a light purple by the time they left.

“So imagine this, it’s 1964 right? Andy Warhol is at the height of his career, churning out pop art masterpieces in the factory and he paints five Marilyn Monroe’s with different coloured backgrounds. *He* paints them, with his own hand, which at this point is rare, right? Because he has his factory, and he has other people make his art for him. Anyway, he invites one of his friends over to the studio to see his works, and his friend brings another friend who's a New York artist, Dorothy.” Regulus is talking animatedly as he removes both of his hands from the wheel to gesture around excitedly. The car starts veering slightly, and James reaches out to grab the wheel to keep it straight on the road. “Oh sorry-” Regulus places both of his hands back on the wheel again. “So Dorothy is a photographer and she asks Warhol if she can shoot those Marilyn paintings he’s done in his studio and of course, Warhol thinks shoot is like photography shoot, so he agrees.”

Someone honks behind Regulus and he flips them off promptly before speeding up. “But instead of a camera, Dorothy pulls out a gun. A *revolver,* and shoots the canvases right in the forehead! The bullet goes straight through four of the five painted Marilyn’s.” Regulus is smiling so widely and looks genuinely pleased.

James thinks it suits him nicely. It's rare to see Regulus like this, normally so poised, so reserved and restrained. Now, he looks younger, he looks his age. A little careless and radiant, much more comfortable after spending an entire afternoon alone with James.

“So what happened? Did Warhol freak out,” James asks softly when Regulus stops talking to read a road sign.

“Oh, sort of. He just banned Dorothy from the factory and refused to see her ever again. But he didn’t sue or anything. Oh, this is it-” Regulus takes a sharp turn, and James is abruptly slammed against the side of the car. “Sorry!” Regulus bites his lip, “you’re distracting me slightly.”

Welcome to the club, James thinks to himself.

“It’s the fifth in the series of Marilyn paintings that’s going up for auction. The one the bullet didn’t get to. She got to witness the whole thing, the whole affair and managed to get out unscathed,” Regulus breathes out.

“And you’re going to buy it?”

“What?”

“The fifth Marilyn. You’re going to buy it?”

Regulus lets out a little laugh. “No. No, I’m not. They estimate it’s going to sell for over two hundred million dollars.”

James can't even begin to comprehend a number that large for an artwork. “Two hundred million?”

Regulus nods, his curls bouncing slightly. “I’m not going to buy it, I’m there to see the person who winds up with it.”

Regulus says this so matter-of-factly that James just nods along, pretending to understand exactly what that means.

It was quiet for a few moments, and then Regulus looks at him, just a brief sideways glance. “Would you like to go with me? Together? To the auction? Is that maybe something you would want to do?”

“As a work outing?” James asks, feeling his heart hammering in his chest. He would say yes regardless of the answer, but he needs some clarity.

Regulus hesitates, feeling James’ eyes on him.

“As a work outing?” James repeats again.

“It would have to be as a work outing,” Regulus answers finally, his voice sounding small. He now seems incredibly focused on the road.

“Is that what you want?” James breathes out softly. “For this to be a work thing? For us to be colleagues?”

The question hangs in the air. Regulus appears as if he's struggling internally, grappling with something in his mind, and then he shakes his head fiercely.

Regulus shakes his head no, but the next words out of his mouth are resigned, not resolute. “That’s how it has to be.”

“I would like to go,” James responds quietly. He doesn't want to push Regulus too far. He's just happy to be anywhere in his general presence. That can be enough for him. “It’s not every day you get to witness a shot Marilyn.”

Regulus gives a soft smile. “No, no it’s not.”

“Tell me something else about yourself,” James says, breaking the silence that settles between them.

“Alright,” Regulus thinks for a moment. He seems to contemplate very carefully about the next words out of his mouth, and then, as if it pains him greatly he sighs. “Well, I’m not very good at driving if I were to be completely honest. I mean back home is bad enough, but here where everything is backwards?” He rolls his eyes exasperatedly and James laughs.

It's that same bright, beautiful laugh from before. It rings in Regulus’ ears and flutters in his ribcage.

“I gathered that your driving skills were-”

“Don’t finish that,” Regulus takes one hand off the wheel to swat at James, sounding harsh but looking a bit sheepish.

They spend the rest of the car ride back in silence, but it isn't uncomfortable, it's peaceful, and Regulus only almost crashes once.

When they pull up to the house, it's nearly pitch black and James gets out of the car first.

“The auction in a few weeks,” Regulus adds again, still sitting in the driver's seat as he looks at James through the opened passenger seat car door. It's more of a question than anything, a brief check to see if James still wants to go, that he hasn't changed his mind.

“It’s a date,” James grins before closing the door.

He turns around to head into the house, hesitating slightly while waiting for Regulus to correct him, but he never does.

Chapter End Notes

<3 Dorlene deserves everything in the universe <3

<3 Regulus being able to pilot a plane across the ocean but not being able to park <3

James "I will totally steal that painting for you" Potter

Regulus "I'm pretty sure I just fell in love" Black

Chapter 7: Burnt Toast

Chapter Summary

Chaos ensues, good chaos, but chaos nonetheless.

Chapter Notes

You all do not even want to know what time it is here!
tw: recreational drinking/drug use

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I know it was you who made breakfast Marlene, the toast is burnt,” Remus grumbles, holding up a blackened piece of bread.

“Oh, shut it, you smother your bread in like six different toppings at once anyway, it’s not like you can taste it,” Marlene shoots back, sticking out her tongue.

“First of all, it’s only four toppings, and second of all, the burnt toast taste is very noticeable!”

Regulus takes a long drink from his coffee, thinking it was far too early for anyone to be arguing, but not yet having enough energy to intervene.

“You don’t have to eat the toast, Evan and I made the rest of it and it’s all edible,” Barty gestures to the wide array of food placed on the table. "Right, Ev?"

Evan has his head down on the table and snores loudly in response. He often opts to sleep through breakfast and Regulus doesn't complain as long as he was with them, sleeping at the table.

Sometimes, everyone takes turns balancing silverware on him to see how many they can fit before a fork or a spoon inevitably clatters to the floor, which makes Evan sit up in alarm and sends the rest of the silverware flying while everyone else laughs.

“I think the toast is lovely,” Dorcas smiles encouragingly to Marlene.

“Really?” She looks at Dorcas quickly, but the other girl is already dissolving into giggles.

“No, sorry. It is quite bad.”

“Like charcoal,” Mary agrees.

“Fine, then tomorrow all of you can make your own damn toast. It’s not my fault Regulus assigned us all chores without asking us first. If he had,” Marlene shoots a glare to Regulus at the other end of the table, “then he would know cooking is not my strong suit.”

“It’s not even cooking, you literally had to put the bread in the toaster and remember to pull it out,” Remus fumes again.

“Your father should’ve remembered to pull it out.”

James and Peter howl loudly and Barty chokes on his drink.

Remus looks more than displeased.

“Alright,” Regulus cuts in sharply, ready to end things before they escalate any further. “Remus you are welcome to toast another piece of bread to your liking. Marlene, next week it’s James and Lily and Peter cooking so you can hold on for a little while longer. Now please,” he snaps, “can we return to some decorum here?”

The rest of the table falls silent for a moment.

“Remus, can you get me one too?” Lily whispers as Mary holds up two fingers when Remus stands to toast some more bread.

“This is what happens when you demand everyone get up at the crack of dawn and eat together before the bloody sun is up,” Peter mutters quietly to James, who nods in agreement.

Soon enough, they all file into the classroom on the third floor, taking their usual seats.

“Today’s class is vitally important, so you will all take notes, you will all listen carefully, and you will all pay attention.” Regulus stands at the front of the room with his hands behind his back. “All of these classes have been vitally important-”

“Debatable,” Evan snorts under his breath.

“-But the lessons were focused on generalities. Today, we are going to be discussing the specifics. I want to talk about *the* museum.”

Everyone sits up straighter at this. Finally, they're getting into the details of the actual heist.

“Any guesses on which one it could be?” Regulus asks, his eyes darting all across the room.

“The Louvre,” Barty calls out.

“The MoMa.” From Lily.

“The Getty.” That's Remus.

Regulus is silent, staring out at all of them from the front.

“The Braxton,” James calls out. “The Braxton in New York.” James has finally put it together. The Braxton has the same floor plan and layout in New Hampshire as it does in New York. That’s why Regulus had gone. “That’s where we’re stealing from.”

Regulus’ eyes meet his, his expression entirely neutral. “Very good, James.”

James tries to smile at him but Regulus is already walking through the rows, handing out maps of the museum floor plan that he had picked up from their outing.

“The Braxton has three branches of their museum. One in New York, one in New Hampshire, and finally, a lesser-known one in Mississippi. The layout for the museum in New Hampshire is identical to the one in New York.”

Everyone flips through the visitors' maps greedily, gleaning any information they can. They open them up fully, spreading out the floor plans across their desks.

“Today we are going to look at the interior galleries, we’ll focus mainly on the rooms containing the old masters and modern art of the Americas. Every question I ask, and every scenario I pose, should be answered and considered with all of the previous information we’ve been learning from before. Do not forget what we’ve been discussing here in your excitement.”

James watches Regulus as he begins writing on the chalkboard. If anyone contains multitudes, it's Regulus Black.

It's hard to imagine him as he was before, in the car grinning and professing his love for Andy Warhol. Now, he stands and moves sharply, his brain focused on one thing only, *success*. His demeanour is cold, all business, and he commands respect without seeming to try, inspiring a cool fear in anyone who dares to challenge him.

“Now,” Regulus continues smoothly. “The museum is roughly trapezoidal in shape, and there are three entry and exit points. The celebrated entrance, the exit in the back of the museum,” Regulus starts drawing a rough diagram on the chalkboard, “and then there’s the staff entrance at the loading docks.”

Everyone else studies their maps and draws their own copies of Regulus’ diagrams in their notes, but James doesn't need to do any of that. He's already been there, and he's been reliving that time in the museum every moment since. He can see the entrance crystal clear, the brass door handle as he opened it for Regulus to walk through, the large lacquered welcome desk where Regulus had grabbed those maps.

“Now the perimeter is not incredibly large, and if we position Barty at this door and Evan at this one,” Regulus continues on and James forces himself to pay attention, willing his mind not to wander through thoughts and daydreams of Regulus Black.

Remus takes a seat at the little iron table on the pavement outside of the café. He takes a small sip of his hot chocolate while he waits for Sirius to arrive. He contemplates ordering coffee, but he was already nervous enough, he doesn't need the caffeine to make him even more jittery. Remus Lupin was also entirely under the impression that a good hot chocolate had magic powers. It could calm the nerves, it could heal the soul, it could mend the worst heartbreak, and warm you from the cold. So, there he sat, drinking his hot chocolate, waiting for Sirius to arrive.

Sirius pulls up a few minutes later on the back of a motorbike as if he doesn't already make Remus swoon enough. A motorbike.

He parks quickly and runs up to Remus breathlessly, “Oh God, I’m sorry I’m late I just- I had a work thing and I’m an arse and-”

“It’s fine,” Remus chuckles slightly at his flustered state. “It’s only eight past four and seeing you ride up on your motorbike made it well worth it.”

Sirius runs a hand through his long dark hair and smiles slightly dejected. “And I was going to pay for your drink. I’ve fucked everything up.” He groans. “Give me two minutes,” He says quickly, walking into the shop.

Motorbike.

Did they call it a motorbike in America?

Remus closes his eyes quickly with the realisation. *Motorcycle.* Remus swears to himself. At least Sirius didn’t seem to notice, but he needs to be more careful. He can't go around saying things like motorbike in an American accent.

When Sirius comes back out again, he has a tea in one hand and a pastry in the other. “The pastry is an apology, you have to accept it,” he sighs as he sits down in the chair across from Remus.

Remus does accept it and hums. It's a chocolate pastry that's warm and delicious.

“That’s cool,” Remus nods to the motorbike parked out front, opting to not use the word at all, just to be safe. “It’s actually very cool.”

Sirius’ eyes light up. “Isn’t it? I’m just renting it while I’m here, but when I get home, I’m going to buy one of my own.”

“Where’s home?” Remus asks lightly. He stares at Sirius, as the sunlight baths him in a light glow. Remus sees that he's wearing eyeliner.

It's a very good thing that he's sitting down.

“England. I’m just here…for a little while.”

Remus can tell that Sirius is holding back, but he certainly isn't going to push it. God knows he has enough secrets of his own to hide. They stare at each other from across the little table, forming their own mutual admiration society.

“I have something very serious to ask you, Moony. And I don’t want you to take offence but it must be done,” Sirius looks at him with wide eyes.

“Well, fire away then,” Remus returns, though his heartbeat picks up.

“Are you single?”

“What?”

“I mean, do you have a boyfriend?”

“Yeah, several actually. I think the last time I counted I was up to five,” he deadpans.

Sirius continues to stare at him with wide eyes.

“No, I don't have a boyfriend. What is- I’m confused,” Remus stammers. “Do you think I-”

Sirius holds his hands up and laughs. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry! Look, to be fair, I’ve never done this before.”

“Done what before?” Remus cries out.

“Well, we did just kind of shag in a museum without knowing anything about each other, and now we’re on a date. I think we did this in the wrong order,” Sirius is still grinning at him, humour evident in his eyes.

“Fuck the order,” Remus laughs lightly. “No, I don't have a boyfriend. I wouldn’t have kissed you if I did.”

“Well, we did more than kiss I’d say. And I wouldn’t be surprised in the slightest if it turned out that you had seven boyfriends, looking as beautiful as you are. I would’ve fallen in love with you at first sight. Well, I guess that’s a bit obvious now, huh?”

“Stop it,” Remus cuts in, blushing.

“I love it when you blush Moony, it really suits you.”

“Yeah, yeah stop.” He rolls his eyes, but he blushes even harder.

They fall into a light conversation after that.

Though they were both dance around things and glaze over certain topics. Speaking in slightly vague obscurities.

Remus quickly learns that Sirius doesn't like to talk about his family, or his childhood, or his job in much detail. Remus does glean that he's an international consultant of some sort. What he consults on or who he consults with, is a mystery.

Remus doesn't complain much either, because he isn't very forthcoming with certain details himself. Of course, Regulus has prepared for everything. He made everyone memorise fake stories about their fake lives, and he made them practise and rehearse those stories over and over again until they sounded natural. Remus is a student at the local community college. He's studying biology. He wants to pursue a PhD eventually and he works part-time to pay the rent in an apartment, *not a flat*, that he lives in with three other roommates.

He feels guilty for lying to Sirius, for spewing out fake details of a fake life, so he tries to steer the conversation in other directions whenever he can. This proves easy enough considering they have a lot of things in common with one another.

They both share a deep love for David Bowie, and spend several minutes debating which song was his best, or their favourite, and ultimately left it up to not being able to choose. They both love spring because that’s when the flowers were in full bloom, they both enjoy Albert Camus, and they are both absolutely terrified of bugs.

After an hour has passed, Remus regretfully has to go. It gets too late, and Regulus would start to get suspicious if Remus wasn't back soon.

“Do you want me to take you home?” Sirius asks, as they stand to leave. “Uh, just to drop you off. But I mean I’d also love to take you home, too. In the other sense,” he winks. "But you can take a ride on the bike."

“No,” Remus laughs slightly. “My car's over at the museum. It’s just across the street, but thanks. Thank you.”

Sirius swings his leg over the motorbike and starts it up. “I already have our next date planned you know,” he grins at Remus.

“Bold of you to assume I want to go out with you again,” Remus raises his eyebrows.

“I know you do. I thought we’d go on a little ride next time. There’s a place I want to show you.”

Remus grins back at Sirius. “Yeah? I’m free next Thursday at noon. Meet me here.”

“So eager to see me, again. Can’t even wait longer than a week,” Sirius taunts playfully.

“Hmm. I think it’s the eyeliner.”

“That’s why I wear it.”

Without thinking about it, Remus takes a few steps and swings his leg over the motorbike so that he's facing Sirius and kisses him. It's slightly uncomfortable because he's half sitting on the bike and half sitting in Sirius’ lap, but neither of them complain.

Sirius does his best to pull Remus closer to him, dragging him so that Remus is further on his lap, straddling him, as Remus runs his hands through Sirius' hair. Remus is the first to pull away after a couple minutes.

"Okay, I really have to go," he breathes, his forehead pressed up against Sirius'.

Sirius nods, slightly too dazed and incredibly too smitten for words.

When Remus pulls up to the house, he hears his phone buzz in his pocket.

He turns the car off and looks at the message from Pete:

You need to get back here ASAP!!! Come in through the back. I unlocked it for you. We were playing chess. Delete when you get this! Delete!

Remus curses under his breath and closes the car door as quietly as possible before heading in through the backdoor.

Upon entering the house, he can hear Regulus and Peter talking, their conversation becoming more clear as Remus approaches.

"A-and don't you think that's odd how the cornea is really one of the only places in the entire human body that doesn't have any blood vessels? The human eye is actually quite fascinating to study when you think about it-"

Remus walks in to see Peter and Regulus in the kitchen. Peter looks panicked and his eyes widened with relief when he sees Remus walk in.

Regulus, who had his back turned to Remus, spins around at the sound of his footsteps approaching. He looked rather bored and just slightly annoyed.

"Peter," Remus tries to calm his nerves and make his voice as steady as possible. "Are you ever going to come back and finish the chess game? I've been waiting."

"Yes, right. Sorry mate. I was getting some water and ran into Regulus. He wanted to know why you hadn't given him the car keys back. I told him I distracted you with a bit of chess, and then I guess I distracted him talking about other things," Peter speaks quickly while Remus tries to make a face as if he totally forgot about the car keys.

"Here, Regulus," He holds the keys out to him. "I'm so sorry."

"That's twice in less than two weeks the keys were late." Regulus takes the keys from him and squints his eyes slightly. "I didn't hear you come down the stairs."

"What?" Remus responds, his mouth going dry.

“You were upstairs playing chess. I didn’t hear you come down.”

“Oh. I’m just quiet I suppose,” Remus offers weakly, feeling slightly nauseous. Now was a very bad time for him to remember that Regulus had threatened to shoot half the people here for potentially declining a job offer. “That’s why you hired me, you know. I’m good at moving in the silence.”

Remus holds his breath, hoping this excuse would be enough to appease him, and as soon as Regulus opens his mouth to speak, James comes bounding into the room.

“Having a chat without me,” James grins widely.

Regulus quickly snaps his attention to James and away from Remus.

“I never see you in the kitchen chatting people up,” James turns towards Regulus. “How lovely it is to see you.”

“I was just here to,” Regulus gestures vaguely, seeming lost all of a sudden. “I was actually just leaving,” he mumbles lowly. “Thank you for the…stimulating conversation Peter,” he says quickly before stalking out of the room.

Remus lets out a deep sigh of relief once he's sure Regulus is gone.

“I had to call James for backup,” Peter explains quietly. “I was getting nervous. I came down here to get some water and Regulus came out and asked me where you were, so I lied and said you were upstairs, but then he was going to go check because he needed the car keys back, and I tried to distract him as best I could, but I didn’t know when you were getting back! So, I also texted James to help out. I figured both of us could deter him slightly longer,” Peter recalls quickly.

“I came as soon as I could,” James adds. “Sorry, I don’t really check my phone when we all live together. Seems odd.”

“Thank you, thank you, thank you, Peter. I owe you. Really,” Remus shakes his head in sincerity.

“He’s proper terrifying,” Peter shudders, referring to Regulus.

“Yeah, I have to admit, I was actually quite scared for a moment,” Remus agrees.

“I don’t think so,” James blurts.

The other two boys turn to look at him.

“He thanked you for the stimulating conversation. That was very sweet of him,” James muses. “Especially, because I don’t think he found it very stimulating at all.”

“You’re disgusting,” Remus says flatly.

“Easy for you to say, James. You came in here at the very end of everything! I was literally about to piss my pants, I was so nervous lying to him like that,” Peter groans. “His eyes look like they can fucking see right through you.”

Remus nods quickly.

James opens his mouth to say something else, but then thinks the better of it as he closes it again.

“I’m going to lay down,” Peter says, ambling towards his room. “I’ll see you both at dinner. Thanks again, James.”

“Happy to help,” James smiles, giving Peter a little salute.

Remus and James stare at each other for a moment before James speaks again. “Do you want to go upstairs and tell me all about what happened this afternoon?”

“Yes, I do,” Remus smiles, already heading for the stairs.

Remus is in a delightful mood. It's one of those moods where he catches himself smiling at absolutely nothing like a complete twat. The next morning, Marlene burns the bread again, and Remus doesn't complain once.

“So, hear us out,” Marlene says, glancing around the group.

Everyone, excluding Regulus, is gathered in the classroom upstairs on the third floor. Marlene and Mary had rounded them all up after dinner for some sort of meeting.

“We’re going to have a party. We should have a party,” she exclaims, smiling widely.

Mary nods. “Yeah, we’re finally getting into the good stuff now in classes. Learning about the actual heist. We’re all going to commit a major felony together soon. I think we should all get drunk together at least once before that.”

“Yes, absolutely,” Evan grins. “I’m in.”

“Me too,” Barty nods.

“Cheers you two,” Marlene flashes another smile at them. “Knew I could count on you both.”

James and Remus look at each other with raised eyebrows.

“Tomorrow, Barty, Evan, and I go out for groceries. When we’re out, I can pick us up the necessary supplies, and we can meet in one of the empty rooms on this floor after Regulus

goes to bed. Then we can party all night Saturday. And we're all off on Sunday, so now is the perfect time to do it!"

Lily shakes her head slightly, "Regulus probably tracks what we're spending. Doesn't he? He'd see all the alcohol charges and then we'd be dead."

"Yes, but we thought of that too," Mary calls in a sing-songy voice. "Marlene and Remus make money at their fake job."

"It's technically a real job," Marlene interrupts. "I mean, we do real work."

"Anyway," Mary continues. "That's their money that Regulus doesn't touch. And it's not like they're going to spend it on anything while we're here. And," she takes a deep breath in, "by the time we're all out of here, we'll be rich, or in jail, so they won't even miss the money!"

Marlene nods encouragingly and Mary turns to Remus waiting for him to answer or object.

"Well," Remus says after a moment, "I can't argue with that logic. Get me some cigarettes and a lighter at the store and I'll pitch in."

Cheers from Marlene, Mary, Barty, and Evan echo about the room.

"Ah, this is going to be so much fun," Marlene lets out a little squeal of delight. "We could use a good drunken party. Okay, so everyone can send what they want to Evan, Barty or me. We're going to the store tomorrow morning at nine, so make your requests before then. No guarantees that we'll be able to accommodate everything you all ask for, but we'll do our best. Remember we're on a budget people!"

"We do want a unanimous decision though," Mary cuts in again, attempting to stop Marlene from getting ahead of herself. "All in favour of having the party say aye!"

"AYE!" Everyone shouts loudly, even Lily.

"All opposed say nay," Mary calls out again.

Silence.

"The ayes have it! The party will commence!" Mary grins as Marlene jumps up and down.

And that's how James finds himself in one of the many spare rooms on the third floor, well on his way to getting sloshed.

They have truly outdone themselves. There's a little table that serves as a makeshift bar. All the spirits are lined up there as well as the cups and mixers. They brought a radio up from one of the rooms downstairs and have playing in the corner. Marlene has Barty and Evan move tables from another room together to make a beer pong table, because they are in America, damn it! And she always wanted to play. None of them are entirely sure about the rules of the game, so they make them up along the way.

Evan and Barty are the reigning champs. James and Mary play once but lose miserably. It's entirely James' fault.

Now, Marlene and Lily try giving it a go.

Remus sits talking to Dorcas in the corner, both smoking near the open window.

James refills his cup with some of Barty's mystery punch, and joins Mary and Peter.

"But aren't you a doctor? Doesn't that pay well," Mary asks Peter.

"Sure," he shrugs amicably, his eyes glossy from drinking. "But I wanted more. Whole reason I was a doctor in the first place was so that I could retire early with a lot of money and do whatever I want."

"And what do you want, Pete," James chimes in.

"I want," he thinks about it for a moment. "I want a nice house, a house with a family and enough money for that house to be on the tropical beach somewhere. I want enough money so that nothing will go wrong that can't be fixed."

"And you?" James turns to Mary. "What do you want to spend your fortune on?"

Mary takes a large drink from her cup, "I want my own studio. To make and sell art, to restore works, to frame them. I want my own studio in London," she nods decisively.

"I want to buy a Rubens painting at auction and outbid every old guy there," Lily calls out as a ping-pong ball lands in one of the cups in front of her with a splash. "Fuck," she mutters.

Evan and Barty cheer loudly.

"Okay, new game everyone," Marlene calls out after a while. "Truth or drink! Gather around!"

"Oh God," Remus sighs, but makes his way to the circle forming in the middle of the room anyway.

"So, the rules are you can ask anyone a question and they have to answer honestly or take a shot," Marlene explains once they sit in a large circle. She holds up a bottle and a shot glass.

"You want to ask a room full of criminals to be honest," Barty snickers.

"If you lie and I find out about it, I will punch you," Marlene slurs slightly.

The music thrums around them.

"If Regulus could see us now," Lily mutters.

"This is one way for us all to bond and learn to trust each other," Peter adds. "So in a way, we are following his rules. In a way."

“Oh my God, you’re right,” Dorcas gasps with the realisation. “That’s clever, Peter. You're very clever.”

“Alright, James you start,” Marlene dictates.

James looks around the circle at the people he was rapidly calling his best friends. “Uh, my question is for Dorcas. What does Regulus have you do when you’re not in class?”

"Good question," Mary nods enthusiastically.

Dorcas blinks for a moment. “He’s having me look for someone to... watch them,” she says carefully.

“Who?” James asks curiously.

“Ah, no follow-up questions, those are the rules,” Marlene interjects, and James sighs in frustration.

“My question is for Barty. Why do you keep letting Marlene toast the bread in the morning when she burns it?” Remus asks as Marlene flips him off.

“Because it’s the only thing we can have her do that Evan and I don’t need to supervise,” Barty snorts.

James quickly gets wrapped up in the game with everyone else. They all drink and have a good time.

Barty confesses that he probably would have shot Marlene if Regulus had told him to, but that he would have hesitated slightly. And then he thinks about it some more, takes the previous statement back and takes a shot instead, much to the consternation of everyone else.

Evan confesses that he has been to jail seven times, most of which he was bailed out by Regulus. Dorcas reveals that she thoroughly enjoys spending the most time with Marlene, which causes Marlene to blush profusely. And all of them take a lot of shots.

As it gets later, Marlene and Dorcas and Peter all opt to dance about the room wildly to the radio. Remus curls up on the couch in the corner of the room with Lily, both of them out cold. On the other side of the room, James sees Evan rolling a joint.

“Where’d you get that?” James slurs. He's pretty drunk if he's being honest with himself, swaying slightly as he looks at Evan.

“Ask me no questions and I’ll tell you no lies, pretty boy,” Evan responds, not bothering to look up. He passes the joint to Mary before he starts rolling another one.

James looks around at the room full of people and his heart swells with love for all of them. They have all spent an incredibly large amount of time together, going through their days side by side. After this, he's going to have lifelong friends. He feels such fondness for all of them

in this moment, he wishes Regulus was here too. That's the only thing that would make the night perfect.

“What’s up?” Barty asks, looking at James after a moment.

“I think Regulus would like this party. I feel bad we didn’t invite him,” James says finally.

Evan laughs. “Yeah, Regulus doesn’t like to party. Not even back in school. He’d never go out.”

“Yeah,” Barty adds. “Don’t get us wrong, we love him but, Regulus Black hates these kinds of things.”

“How’d you all become friends?” James asks looking at both of them. Mary sits on the windowsill quietly listening.

“School, like I said,” Evan says a bit gruffly.

“We were all roommates at one point. None of us were looking for friends but it was a bit of a shit time for all of us so, we thought if we were going to be miserable-”

“-best to be miserable together,” Evan finishes Barty’s sentence with a tight smile.

James nods, finishing his drink. His head buzzing with thoughts and alcohol. “I’ll be back, I’m going to the bathroom.”

Mary waves and James heads out. Before he registers what he's doing, he makes his way down the stairs to the first floor.

The house is dark and he stumbles over a few things, using the walls to guide and support him.

When he gets to the door he sees a soft glow of light from underneath the crack in the floor and he knocks softly. After waiting a few seconds, he goes to knock again, and the door swings open.

“James?” Regulus squints, the light from his bedroom bathing James in a soft glow. “It’s almost two in the mor-”

“Hi,” James grins, dropping his hand back to his side. Regulus’ curls are more messy than usual. They look tousled, and Regulus answers the door wearing a plain black t-shirt and sweatpants. It's the most casual James has ever seen him. “Were you asleep?”

“No,” Regulus says quickly still standing in the doorway. “I was reading. Is everything alright?”

“Yes,” James nods quickly, trying his best to act casual.

“Oh Jesus fucking Christ,” Regulus mutters under his breath. “You’re drunk.” His eyes shoot up to meet James’. He does not look pleased. “You’re fucking drunk?”

“Don’t be mad,” James says quickly. “It was a team bonding exercise.”

“*All* of you are up there drinking right now? You smell like a bar.”

“What can you expect? This is a highly taxing environment. We were just trying to let loose.” James slurs, trying to make Regulus understand. “I came down here to invite you, actually. Barty and Evan didn’t think you’d want to go, but I thought I’d ask.”

“Why would you do that?” Regulus shakes his head. “You are literally in the process of breaking one of my rules and you came down here to let me know?” His expression softens slightly at the look on James’ face.

“I missed you.”

James closes his mouth quickly. That wasn’t supposed to happen. He wasn’t supposed to say that out loud.

Regulus freezes.

“Can I come in?” James asks after a moment.

Regulus doesn't speak, he just opens the door wider and stands to the side.

“Woah,” James breathes looking around.

Inside Regulus’ room are diagrams and drawings, close-up details of paintings, notes scattered everywhere, and charts plastered to the ceiling. “You’re certifiably insane.”

“Sit down,” Regulus says, rolling his eyes and pointing to the bed. It's unmade, and it smells like Regulus, and there was a book placed face down on one side.

James obliges happily as Regulus walks into the bathroom, returning moments later with a glass of water that he holds out to James. “Drink that.”

James begins gulping the water down as Regulus watches him carefully.

“So, you’re having a party,” he says again once James has emptied his glass.

“Please don’t be mad,” James begs. “Don’t be mad at me.”

Regulus thinks for a moment, leaning against the wall with his arms crossed, as he regards James through the curls that hang in his face.

Oh, he’s so pretty, James thinks over and over again as he waits for Regulus to decide his fate.

“Please,” James adds again just for good measure, making sure to throw in his best puppy dog eyes for good measure.

Regulus lets out a heavy sigh. “I’m not mad at you,” He says at last. “But if this happens again-”

“It won’t,” James cuts in quickly, smiling once more. “It won’t, I promise.”

“Alright then,” Regulus sniffs a little shortly, thinking again for a moment. “When you leave, I’m just going to pretend that I have no knowledge of whatever is going on upstairs and that you never came down here and no one is worse off.”

James nods, setting his empty glass down before standing up. “The invitation still stands if you want to say fuck the rules and come upstairs.”

Regulus shakes his head. “No, I don't think that would be a very good idea.”

James takes a small step towards Regulus and regards him thoughtfully.

It makes Regulus entirely too nervous for his own good.

“What,” Regulus asks after a moment. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Do you want to know a secret?" James whispers.

“I think you’ve told me enough secrets for tonight,” Regulus responds quickly.

“I should’ve kissed you at the museum,” he continues lowly, undeterred.

Regulus feels his breath catch in his throat.

“That would’ve been nice, I think. Don’t you think? I’ve been thinking about it a lot. But I missed my chance,” he pouts. “The moment is passed.”

“The moment *has* passed,” Regulus corrects, softly. He's so nervous, that he can't think of anything to say. He has no idea what to do.

“We should go back in time so I can get a do-over,” James sways slightly.

“We can always go back to the museum,” Regulus murmurs without thinking. “Another day.” He isn't thinking at all.

James is here, in his room, drunk out of his mind, and looking so lovely.

James’ pout turns into a smirk very quickly. “ S’this your way of saying you want me to kiss you in that museum?”

He takes a step closer to Regulus.

They're close, incredibly close.

A few beats of silence. “Do you want to kiss me, Regulus?”

Regulus can't breathe, he can't formulate any thoughts or words. There's just James. Just James and his soft brown eyes that are looking at him with a gaze so strong it almost makes Regulus’ knees buckle. How is this situation getting so out of control so quickly?

“Did you want to kiss me when you had that gun to my head,” James murmurs, taking another small step forward, but this time, Regulus does his best to step back. He was already close to the wall, and now, he's entirely pressed up against it.

“James,” he says softly, the only word his brain can think of.

James places his hand on Regulus’ chest softly and smirks again. He can feel his heartbeat flutter like a trapped hummingbird underneath his palm. That is the only answer he needs.

James pulls away quickly and Regulus lets in a sharp breath, biting his tongue to keep from protesting.

“I think they’ll miss me if I don’t get back to the party upstairs,” James grins lazily, heading towards the door. His demeanour has changed entirely from a penitent wrongdoer to an arrogant little charmer.

“I’m going to pretend like I didn’t hear that,” Regulus glares, trying not to get whiplash from the entire interaction. “Get some more water James, and some sleep.”

“I will,” he responds, opening the door. “Thank you for not being mad. You’re... really great,” he calls out softly before closing the door and leaving Regulus alone in his room again.

In the silence that follows, Regulus tried to calm down, flopping himself down on his bed with a soft sigh.

Chapter End Notes

<3 Marlene <3 That's it, that's the tweet.

Regulus is down so bad. SO BAD. but so is James tbh.

I hope you all are well, I'm going to bed now gn. <3

Chapter 8: Les Fleurs et Les Frères

Chapter Summary

The Black brothers, you know. Dramatic.

Chapter Notes

tw: brief mention of gun violence
French translations provided in the end notes!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“And I do feel bad about not being completely honest with him, because when I told him I wanted to tell him all my secrets I meant it, I really meant it. But, I also think that his working at an art museum while I’m an INTERPOL art agent might freak him out a little. I don’t want him to think I’m investigating him or anything. I really like him,” Sirius rambles on while Pandora nods along supportively. “I would ask him to move in with me, I think, if I wasn’t so sure it would entirely freak him out. He’s the one I’m pretty sure. You should see him, when he laughs and when he blushes-God when he blushes my heart explodes.”

Pandora hasn't stopped grinning as she watches Sirius sigh and drape himself dramatically across a chair like a lovesick fool. They're all supposed to be discussing more theories, the next course of action to take, and any new evidence they might have found pertaining to Regulus Black. However, Sirius has other things in mind for that meeting. Well, one other thing in mind.

“Do you believe in love at first sight Frank?” Sirius turns to him questioningly.

Frank lets out a snort. “No. But I do believe we should get back to work.”

“Not even when you met Alice? Wait till I tell her, I’m not sure she’d be happy to hear that,” Sirius grins as he prods Frank with an elbow.

“Alice and I love each other very much, but we work at it all the time. It didn’t click instantly, we took time to figure each other out, to know how to be the best version of ourselves that we each needed,” Frank grumbles into his coffee cup.

“Well, I think you should follow your heart. I believe in love at first sight,” Pandora chimes in softly. “If you think he’s the one, you should elope. You can always get divorced later if you realise it was a mistake.”

Both Frank and Sirius look over at her in surprise.

"You do realise they've been on one date," Frank says flatly.

"Well, I'd say one and a half. Maybe two. Semantics," Sirius chimes in again, waving a dismissive hand around.

“I know, I’m just saying,” She shrugs lightly.

“Well, this has been a productive morning, but I have to go. I have a date,” Sirius grins, getting up and drumming his hands on the table excitedly.

“We’ve done absolutely nothing all morning are you serious?” Frank groans exasperatedly.

“Yes,” Sirius sings. “Yes, I am Sirius.”

“I am going to call Alice as soon as you leave and get a new partner.”

Sirius lets out a mock gasp, placing a hand on his heart, “You’re going to divorce me? You can’t divorce me, I was the best man at your wedding!”

Frank rolls his eyes.

“I’ll be back this afternoon, don’t find anything exciting without me,” Sirius calls before leaving the office.

When he pulls up, Remus is already standing outside waiting for him.

Sirius feels his heartbeat pick up quickly and he smiles quickly to hide his nerves.

Remus smiles back at him. “So what, am I just supposed to hop on the back of this thing?”

Sirius nods, “I brought a spare helmet. That’s exactly what you’re supposed to do.” He grabs the bright red helmet and holds it out to him.

“I’m going to look so stupid,” Remus groans, already putting it on his head and buckling the strap anyway.

“Everyone looks stupid in a helmet it’s fine. It’s about protecting that beautiful intelligent brain of yours, not looking hot.”

“You look hot in a helmet,” Remus counters and Sirius has to remind himself to breathe.

Remus throws one leg around the back of the motorbike before he wraps his arms around Sirius tightly. “Look, I don’t want to be too presumptuous here, but I do have to be back at four.”

“Why? Do you turn into a pumpkin after then?” Sirius jokes, feeling absolutely dazed by their proximity.

Remus called out of work for the entire day in preparation for this date, but Regulus doesn't know that. As far as Regulus is concerned, Remus is at work, and he gets off of work at four.

This time, Remus can't afford to be even a minute late. He needs to have those car keys in Regulus' hand as soon as he walks in the door. He can't make a mistake like the last time again.

Remus lets out a small laugh to ease his tension. "Something like that."

"I'll have you back before then so don't worry," Sirius says lightly. "Unfortunately, I have to get back to work sometime this afternoon. Ready to go?"

Remus places his chin on Sirius' shoulder and whispers softly, "Yes. I'm not scared, I want you to know that, but if you could just maybe give me a countdown before you start to drive, I would appreciate it."

Sirius chuckles slightly, "Sure, anything for you Moony. Three…two…one."

And they're off, flying through the streets as the wind whips around them.

Remus holds on tightly at first, which Sirius doesn't mind one bit, but as they continued driving, his grip loosens slightly.

It's a freeing feeling, riding on the back of a motorbike with Sirius. Remus laughs in delight more than a few times, and Sirius laughs too, unable to help himself.

Remus' joy is better than any drug he's ever known. He wants to keep making him laugh forever. Sirius also refuses to tell Remus where they are going, regardless of how many times Remus asks and manages to keep it a secret right until the very moment they pull up and park.

"Well, this is it," Sirius sighs as they approach.

Remus looks around in wonder. Before them is an open-air market of sorts, with wooden booths that line both sides of a pathway. They seem to stretch on for a good distance as people flutter from one stand to the next. All of the booths have little painted signs advertising the different flowers the sell.

Sirius has brought him to a flower market.

"Last time we were talking, you said you loved spring because the flowers were in bloom then. I know it's not spring, but I thought I'd bring you to the flowers anyway. They import them from other places, all over the world I think and the market is here for two weeks so I thought you'd like it," Sirius explains nervously.

In a surge of emotion, Remus leans over and brushes his lips across Sirius' temple. "I love it."

He slips his hand into Sirius' and begins leading them through the stalls. "I'm going to build you the best fucking flower bouquet you'll ever get," he grins, already getting distracted by the tulips.

Sirius lets Remus pull him along to every stall as he examines each flower carefully and smells them all. The assortments are plentiful and bursting with a myriad of bright colours and fresh scents. Each vendor greets them kindly and answers all of Remus' questions about where the flowers came from, how long they lasted, how best to take care of them, and a billion other things. Whenever he sees a flower he likes, he carefully adds it to the little bundle he was amassing in his hands and paid for it.

No matter how many times Sirius tries to insist he pay, Remus doesn't allow it.

Once they have gone through every booth at least twice, they finally make their way back to Sirius' bike.

Sirius with a new bundle of the most beautiful flowers he's ever seen, and Remus hand in hand with the most beautiful person he's ever seen.

The whole ride back, they talk and laugh whenever they can, Remus already feeling painfully sad that he has to leave Sirius again so soon. He tries not to let it dampen the few remaining moments they have left.

"Well, I suppose this is your stop," Sirius says, rather despondent as he pulls up outside of the museum again.

"Yeah," Remus sighs, getting off the back of the motorbike and stretching his legs. "Um," he stands on the pavement a bit awkwardly. "My number is on the inside of the bouquet. On the parchment. You can call me or something."

Sirius grins madly, taking a moment to process what Remus has just said. "Moony, I'm so fucking crazy about you, you have no idea."

"Yeah," Remus blushes, biting his lip. "I'm a bit mad about you too, I think."

"I'm going to call you."

"I hope so."

Remus leans down to kiss Sirius, before walking to his car. He has more than an hour before he technically gets off work, so he takes some time to sit in the driver's seat as he contemplates what to do.

His phone buzzes in his pocket and he picked it up.

"Hello?"

“Hey Moony.”

Remus can practically hear Sirius’ grin on the other end of the line.

“Sirius, it’s been three minutes since I last saw you.”

“I know but I just wanted to call and tell you thank you, for the flowers.”

Remus laughs. “Yeah, well thank you for the date.”

“Also I had to check to make sure this was your real number. And it is.”

“Yes, it is.”

“And now you have my number so you can save it under the hottest, most sexy, most charming person you’ve ever seen.”

“Bit long for a contact name don’t you think?”

“Not at all,” Sirius grins, even though Remus can't see him. “Okay, I’m going to go. I have to go.”

“Okay,” Remus’ face hurts from smiling so much.

“Bye, Moony.”

“Bye, Sirius.”

Sirius makes a quick stop by his hotel room to put the flowers in some water before heading back to work for the afternoon, and this time, they actually all do work. Much to Frank's satisfaction.

Pandora believes she has some leads in the rental car companies. Frank hasn't found anything searching hotels in the immediate area surrounding the private airport, so he tell them that he's expanding outwards. Sirius is buried in footage from storefront cameras and street cameras that are located along paths leading away from the private airport. He goes through hours of footage tape trying to pick up any sign of Regulus or the people he was with but to no avail.

By the end of the day, he's still optimistically happy, despite their limited progress. Remus just has that effect on him. He was excited to get back to his hotel so he could think about how soon was too soon to call him again.

When he does get back to the hotel, he finds himself preoccupied, wondering what he should do for the rest of the evening. Where he should go to dinner. When he should call Remus. What he should read to pass the time. If a text was better than a phone call. He puts his key in the lock with a click and turns the handle, stepping in with a short sigh.

“Sirius.”

He freezes at the sound of that voice, vaguely aware of the door closing behind him.

Trapped.

Like a dog in a cage.

Sirius didn't even have time to turn on the light, the room only illuminated by the setting sun streaming through the soft slants in the window.

Here, sitting in the semi-dark of his hotel room, sits his brother.

He's perched on the edge of Sirius' unmade bed, sitting deathly still.

His first thought, strangely, is that Regulus has let his hair grow out slightly. He was never allowed to do that before.

Regulus isn't grinning but he doesn't need to. Sirius knows his brother and can tell by the glint in his eye that he's relishing this moment. Enjoying Sirius’ shocked surprise.

Eventually, he stands up and crosses his arms.

“Regulus,” Sirius answers slowly, warningly. “It’s been a while.”

“Three years.”

“I left long before that.”

Regulus stares at him calmly, his face completely unreadable. Statuesque. Sirius always hated when Regulus would do that when they were younger, and he was never quite sure how he managed it. How he could pack himself up and hide himself away. No emotion, no reaction, just unwavering neutrality where no one could reach him.

“Three years since I saw you following me in Stockholm. And now I see you’ve followed me here,” Regulus' eyes narrow. “I think you have a real problem.”

“The only one with a problem here is you,” Sirius returns, feeling his blood boil slightly.

He's still trying to process how Regulus is here, but most importantly, why he picked now to talk to him. “Tell me, what did you do with that Degas? The one from France?”

Regulus' eyes flick up to meet his, and the bastard has the nerve to raise an eyebrow in question, a slight smirk ghosting his mouth, “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“What?” Sirius challenges, trying to keep his voice equally as calm as Regulus’. “Afraid I’m wearing a wire? Afraid my room is bugged?”

“I know it’s not. I checked. And what you wear under your clothes is no business of mine.”

“That Degas,” Sirius tries again. “You stole my favourite fucking painting. You were practically screaming out for my attention. Begging for me to notice you.”

“You know it’s a real shame about that Degas, especially for you, considering how much you loved it. Now you can never see it in person again and the online renderings never do it proper justice.”

“Why are you here, Regulus?”

“Funny, I could ask you the same.”

They stare at each other from across the room. While there's a great deal of space between them, the tension makes the air almost unbreathable.

Sirius hasn’t moved from the spot where he first walked in the door, his feet were planted to the spot. He's shooting daggers at Regulus who appears completely unaffected. A choice that makes Sirius want to grab him by the shoulders and shake him violently. They're both poised, postures rigid as if either of them would pounce at any second.

“I could arrest you right now,” Sirius bluffs. “You took a huge risk showing up here.”

Regulus laughs. It's a cold, sharp sound that's completely devoid of any humour. It makes Sirius shutter as he's reminded of their mother.

“You have nothing. That’s why I can stand here, in your room, go through your things, talk to you,” Regulus taunts. “You have absolutely no evidence, no proof of anything. If you did, I suspect I’d already be halfway back to England by now. In handcuffs no less.”

“Breaking into my room? Going through my things? Stealing art that reminds you of me? Who’s the one with a problem now, baby brother?”

Regulus doesn't move, but Sirius can see a flicker of emotion pass through his eyes before they return to that cold neutrality.

The only word that could ever make him react.

Brother.

“You’re wasting your time here, Sirius. You’ve been wasting your time for years. You’ve been following me, keeping tabs on me, and what do you have to show for it? Nothing. Your partners are bored of you chasing dead ends, you’ve wasted their time too.”

“I know you’re planning something here, and this time, I’m going to catch you,” he returns, resisting the urge to yell.

“No, you won’t. You’ll always turn up empty-handed. And even if you did catch me, then what?” Regulus asks. Though his tone is light, it's still sharp. A pointed dagger, aimed to pierce, to kill. “Then you can rest? Then you’ve corrected the wrongs you intended to set,

right? Will that make you happy? Will you be satisfied with making me miserable, keeping me locked up in a place where you can always find me? Under your thumb?"

"At least I know you'd be safe. Miserable, but safe."

Regulus scoffs coldly. "Is that what you tell yourself? Is that how you justify your insane obsession?"

"Why are you here, Regulus?" Sirius' voice comes out more strained. "Why now? Why not three years ago in Stockholm? Or in London? Why now?"

Regulus regards him carefully, his gaze completely unwavering. He seems to be thinking deeply about what to say. This was how it always is with him.

Calculating.

Rehearsed.

If Sirius was outwardly passionate in everything- his emotions, his words, his actions, Regulus was always the opposite.

Sirius knows that he is the heat of the argument, the boiling blood, the seething rage, the sting in the back of your throat after yelling too loud and too long. Regulus was always the ice that comes after it. The cool frost, the sharp sting of emptiness, the withering winter that left you wondering if he ever cared or if you imagined the entire thing.

Sirius takes this opportunity, where Regulus seems lost in thought, to slowly reach for the phone in his pocket. His hand inches in micro-movements.

Slowly.

Slowly.

If he can just start recording the conversation, or if he can manage to dial Frank so that he can listen in... anything would be better than doing nothing at all.

"Now, because I'm finally doing what our father never did. That's why now." Regulus' eyes bore into Sirius', waiting for him to absorb the impact of that statement, to work out its implications. Then he clicks his tongue sharply, "Don't be stupid, Sirius." He looked down quickly at Sirius' hand which is almost inside his pocket.

Sirius freezes, cursing inside his head.

"And here I thought we were getting along so well," Regulus continues in a mocking tone.

"So what? You're here to do what Orion couldn't and you came to gloat? You came to rub it in my face? I hate to tell you this, but gloating normally requires success beforehand. You haven't done anything yet," Sirius counters sharply.

Regulus purses his lips in a tight line at his words. “I will be successful,” he says so fiercely that it almost sends a chill up Sirius’ spine. *Almost*. “I stopped needing you to believe in me a long time ago.”

Sirius recognizes the position he's currently in.

Standing alone in a rented-out room with his little brother who is most likely armed and ready to kill wasn’t the best time to make him angry. Especially considering Regulus has lost his mind, breaking in and going through Sirius’ things.

“I came,” Regulus continues, his tone calm once more, “to make you a proposition. This work was just as important to you once as it was to the rest of us. I know it, you know it, and no matter how much you tell yourself you’ve changed, and you’re not like us, you are. Years of training, our entire childhoods, were leading up to this moment.”

Sirius opens his mouth to speak, but Regulus continues on anyway. “Join me, and we can do this together. The way we always wanted.”

The way he say it seems so blaisé, so apathetic one way or the other, but Sirius feels the weight of the proposition nearly crush his chest. It knocks the wind out of him. It sends his mind reeling. He turns it over and over again in his mind until an involuntary laugh bubbles out of him. A crazed sounds that makes Regulus' face harden instantly.

“You actually think that I would consider, for a second, doing that? You really have lost your mind. I will *never*,” Sirius spits, “subject myself to that family. I will never come back. So you can go ahead and tell Orion and Walburga that-”

“-They’re dead, Sirius. I won’t be telling them anything.”

There it is again. That remarkable capability of Regulus Black to bring the frost. It settles in Sirius’ chest, it gets caught in his throat, sinks in his stomach: that cold, dead, feeling.

“Do you really think I would be here if they were alive?”

“They’re dea- no that’s possible. Orion was sick, I knew he was sick but-” Sirius’ mind is reeling, moving in a million different directions.

He knew his father was sick, the last time he had bothered to check. When Sirius left, he knew that they were already propping Regulus up to take over everything. All of the thefts, the backroom dealings, the Black family empire. He knew that Regulus had assumed that role graciously, that he had done everything they asked of him, and that his mother had taken Orion to the south of France to focus on his recovery. Everyone knew Orion wouldn't recover, but Sirius had no idea he'd declined so rapidly. And now, he knows, that orion is dead. And so is Walburga.

“When did they-”

“Two years ago,” Regulus cuts him off.

“Was there a funeral?”

“Would you have gone if there was?”

Sirius swallows thickly. He needs to regain control of this conversation. He can't risk letting Regulus have the upper hand. It would only cause him to spiral.

“I didn’t think so,” Regulus scoffs.

“Both of them? What happened?” He tries to sound as apathetic as Regulus. He wants his voice to come out as unemotional as his brother’s, but there's an edge to it.

“Father was sick. You knew that. And then he died. Mother died a few months later; she never recovered from her grief.” His voice is flat but it wavers slightly. “So, now you know. Orion bears no weight on the situation anymore. There is only me.”

Sirius nods, “You’re all alone.”

Regulus’ eyes widen at this.

Finally, Sirius thinks. *Finally, I've hit a nerve*.

“You see what this life does to you Regulus.” Sirius sees the opening in Regulus’ silence and takes it. “You see now, what I was telling you before? It takes and it takes until there’s nothing left. Until you’re completely isolated from the rest of the world. If you’re not killed doing what you’re doing, then the other people you work with are! And then you’re alone.”

“Fuck off,” Regulus says quickly. “I could be killed being a fucking fireman or by falling off a roof as a contractor! And father and mother didn’t die on the fucking job anyway,” Regulus fumes.

“Right, and yet, there’s only you,” Sirius echoes his words back to him.

“This isn’t even about me,” Regulus shakes his head after a minute, a cold sneer on his face. “This is about you and what happened that night.”

The conversation is getting erratic, bouncing all over the place. Regulus always speaking in vague obscurities, Sirius trying to navigate him into an admission of regret, remorse, guilt, anything.

“Of course it is! Of course it’s about what happened that night, which has everything to do with you by the way!” Sirius’ voice is loud now, not bothering anymore to put on an apathetic front. His heart beats red-hot and angry as his hands began to shake slightly. “I was shot! I was shot and I have the fucking scar to prove it and you just left. You just left me there to die and left with Orion.”

“You got shot because you opened your mouth and said something you shouldn’t have! Father warned you, he told you to keep quiet, but you didn’t listen, you never listen. You knew how precarious selling to Reinhard Lestrange would be, how dangerous he was, but

you thought you could open your mouth anyway, so you did! And that time, you didn't get away with it."

"I thought I was going to *die*," Sirius bellows loudly.

Regulus has the strange sensation that he's standing across from his father for a moment.

"I was a child."

"So was I," Regulus says quietly. "Besides, I didn't just leave you. Who the fuck do you think called Andromeda to come in there and save your life?"

Sirius blinks. Trying to stable himself as he feels the floor fall out from under him rapidly.

"In every situation, in any way you spin it, however you look at it, you were the one who left first, Sirius."

Sirius can't keep up. Regulus has to be lying.

He remembers that night, it's permanently etched into his brain. But he woke up in a private hospital. Someone must have taken him to the private hospital, sure. He had always assumed that it was one of Lestrange's guys. Too afraid to kill him in fear of retaliation from Orion, but smart enough to remove evidence of their involvement in the whole ordeal. Was it actually Andromeda? Did it matter if it was?

It's not exactly like he stuck around to find out either way.

"Fuck you," Sirius spits once he manages to get his thoughts semi-coherent. "Fuck you."

"That's fine. I'll let you think about my proposition. You'll never have enough evidence to indict let alone convict anyway. Forgive me for trying to give you an alternative to wasting your life."

"You are so fucking full of yourself," Sirius takes a step forward.

At this, Regulus smirks, "Yeah, I suppose I am. We'll talk later, I'll find you."

"How?"

He shrugs as if the answer is glaringly obvious. "How did I break into your hotel room? How did I know where you were staying? Hmm? Ce n'est rien pour moi, tu le sais."

Regulus moves towards the door, inching closer to Sirius. "In the meantime, enjoy following all of your dead ends."

Sirius stands there, watching Regulus carefully, trying to take in all of this information as best he can. He feels as if he's been standing there for hours, even though he knows it's only been a few minutes. He's incredibly tired, the conversation completely taking all of the energy out of him. His bones feel too heavy and sodden all of a sudden. He needs to lie down.

He isn't sure what to do. He had been fantasising about this moment for a long time. The moment he got to be in a room with Regulus alone, but nothing has gone to plan. He hasn't said half of the things he wants to, and as his brother makes his way to the door, Sirius begins to feel an acute panic set in. He can't let Regulus leave, but he doesn't know what to do with him if he stays.

Regulus has his hand on the door handle and just as he moves to open it, he turns back to Sirius as if a thought has just occurred to him.

They're standing close enough that Sirius can reach out and fully grab him, physically restrain him, to prevent him from leaving. But Regulus has other plans.

Always one step ahead. Always playing chess while Sirius was stuck playing checkers.

Before Sirius can figure out what to do, Regulus reaches out, and in one fell swoop he sticks something sharp like a pin into the exposed part of Sirius' arm.

Sirius reeled backwards in surprise, looking at the little welt of blood where he's been struck. A tiny pinprick.

"I'd sit down if I were you," Regulus suggests calmly.

"What did you do?" Sirius manages to ask, already feeling a bit strange.

"Rocuronium. I won't bore you with the details but it's a fast-acting paralytic that will activate in one to two minutes. You'll want to be sitting down."

Sirius feels himself swaying, his head garbled as if it has suddenly been submerged underwater, as his mouth goes dry.

Carefully, he inches himself down to the floor.

"Don't worry, you'll still be fully conscious, you just won't be able to move for about fifteen to thirty minutes. I do hope you don't have any immediate plans. Any traces of the drug leave your system in about thirty-five minutes after injection."

"Regulus, you fucking-" Sirius tries to speak, but he can't get the words out. He doesn't know if it's the effects of the drug already, or if it's the sheer terror he feels in that moment that prevents hom.

"I can't leave and have you follow me now can I? That would make your job entirely too easy. We'll speak again soon," he calls out over his shoulder, before he pulls open the door.

Regulus looks back one last time, noting the flowers sitting next to Sirius' bed on the little table. He thinks they look awfully out of place for the dull beige room they're found in, and then he closes the door, leaving his brother panicked and sitting on the carpet.

Regulus exits quickly and quietly, the same way he entered. Down the stairs and out the back. He pries open the car door that's waiting for him, and jumps in the passenger seat.

“Drive,” he demands, eager to get out of there and as far away from Sirius as possible.

Regulus decides that he isn't going to think about the things Sirius has said to him. He isn't going to think about the pity in Sirius’ eyes when he told Regulus he was all alone, or how they were both children, or how Sirius was right. Regulus had stolen that Degas for him, or because of him.

No, he isn't going to think about any of that.

“Barty, I said drive.”

The drug lasts approximately twenty-two minutes for Sirius. He sits there desperately trying to wiggle his fingers and then his toes. He counts the seconds that make up the minutes, he reminds himself to breathe, and he thinks about what to do.

Regulus is good, he knows that. He's always knowns that. There would be no proof that he had broken into Sirius’ room. He hasn't stolen anything that Sirius is aware of, the drug wouldn’t even be in his system by the time he could make it to a hospital, and even if it was, there would be no way to prove Regulus was the one who had drugged him.

He feels helpless. If he can't do anything about the immediate situation, he could at least make Regulus’ life more difficult in any way that he can.

As soon as he is able to move, he pulls out his phone to make a call.

“Alice,” he says into the line when she picks up. “It’s Sirius,” he lets out a sigh. “I’m going to need another hotel. Preferably, one with deadbolts on the doors.”

Chapter End Notes

Les Fleurs et Les Frères = the flowers and the brothers
Ce n'est rien pour moi, tu le sais = it's nothing for me, you know that

Not that anyone asked but the songs I listened to while writing the wolfstar date were
Kiss Goodnight by I DON'T KNOW HOW BUT THEY FOUND ME (while they're riding on the motorbike)
Aline by Jarvis Crocker (flower market)
Come Around by Peter McPoland (end of the date convo + the phone call)

Me going one (1) chapter without writing about James Potter:
Me: I miss him :(

Chapter 9: Drowning Degas' Dancers

Chapter Summary

> Regulus Black and any form of water will always be intrinsically tied to one another. I don't make the rules.

Chapter Notes

> Another chapter up and out! This one is super short and mainly for me because I missed James (tho it still serves a purpose I swear). Also I got this one out so quickly because my professor cancelled class today so I had a lot of free time :)
>
> Also also new chapter of Choices comes out soon and you all have been warned that I will be AWOL in the days following that update bc I will be crying,,, profusely.
>
> Thanks for reading <33 Love you all mwah xx

See the end of the chapter for more notes

> “Welcome to the V.I.P. lounge,” Dorcas grins as James follows Regulus into a room on the third floor.
>
> It's set up with every kind of computer and a million monitors that all whir and hum with life. Dorcas has strings of code running across several screens, video footage of streets, museum interiors, and white screens with indecipherable black text running across them. James can't make sense of any of it as his eyes dance around the screens.
>
> Regulus gestures to the only other empty seat in the room with two monitors readily available for James. He sits down and stares at Regulus expectantly.
>
> “Today I need you to work on setting up legitimate banking accounts to store illegitimate money in.”
>
> “Can you tell me what it’s for?” James asks carefully.
>
> Regulus has been in a contemptuous mood these past few days. Short tempered, snapping at everyone, even more death glares than usual. Everyone's been tiptoeing around him, walking on eggshells in his presence. Peter scurries out of the room when Regulus enters, and everyone avoids eye contact. The only one who seems to have an idea for the mood shift was

Barty, who says absolutely nothing about it to anyone, but always makes sure to defend Regulus when the need arises.

“As I’m sure you know, art isn’t currently considered a financial asset in the strict legal sense, so it goes ungoverned by financial regulations. This also means that sellers of artworks don’t have to disclose names to buyers of the artwork and vice versa. But this is only if you go through private art dealers and a select few galleries. I need to buy some paintings, actually, from the auction that’s coming up, and I need everything to look as legitimate as possible while using funds I obtained…illegally. Because while art isn't considered a financial asset, the revenue generated from buying and selling it is.”

James nods along to show he's following Regulus.

“Auction houses don’t accept cash which is less than ideal, and they have a habit of working with banks, reaching out to them, checking financial statements to make sure all the funds were obtained properly. It’s their way of maintaining the integrity of the art world and stopping all the money laundering that goes on.” Regulus scoffs and rolls his eyes for good measure.

“So you need me to set up an account, and deposit cash in a way that doesn’t tip off any financial agencies, and make it look as reputable as possible for when the auction house comes sniffing around?”

“Exactly. You can do that?”

“Easily,” James grins, happy to put his skills to use finally. “How much money are you looking to store?”

“Nothing much, just 1.2 million? That should be enough.”

Dorcas tries to stifle a disbelieving laugh but it comes out as a half-snort.

“Everything you should need will be in that file there,” Regulus continues, nodding to the envelope by James’ elbow. “But if you have any questions, come find me. If you finish before class, feel free to come join us.”

James nods tearing into the file, eager to get started.

Regulus makes his way to the door, but Dorcas stops him quickly.

“The thing you needed me to look into,” she's whispering so quietly James had to strain to listen. “There’s been an update. He moved hotels, upped his security measures too I think. Here,” she hands him a folder that looks a lot like the one near James’ elbow.

Regulus nods stiffly, grabbing it from her before walking out.

“So,” Dorcas turns to him after a few minutes have passed. “Now you see what I do when I’m not in class.”

“I can see it, but understanding it is a whole different thing,” James laughs lightly.

“Aren’t our jobs the coolest?” Dorcas smiles. “Look at us, becoming integral parts of the operation.”

James nods. “Yeah, it feels pretty cool.”

“Alright, so look at this,” Dorcas points to one of the screens at a museum where a security guard wanders around the gallery. “This guy sneaks out every Tuesday morning to see his girlfriend for twenty minutes while he’s on the job. I couldn’t figure out for the life of me why he does that so I looked into him. Don’t tell Regulus, it was an unauthorised search, and turns out he’s married! To another woman!”

“No,” James gasps, his eyes wide.

“Look! He’s going to meet her now! Right on time,” Dorcas grins, wiggling her eyebrows.

“Oh my God,” James watches as the man strides across the gallery floor, looking over his shoulder inconspicuously. “Oh my God?”

“Right?”

They work side by side, diligently clacking away at their keyboards for the entire morning. James would be lying if he said he didn't feel immensely cooler than he ever has before. He's fairly certain that being in such close proximity to Dorcas was playing a large part as she blasts music from one of the open tabs on her computer.

After a while, he turns to her curiously, trying not to grin, "So, what's going on with you and Marlene?"

Dorcas stops typing, her hands hovering above the keys for a second before she resumes again. "Nothing," she tries to sound casual. "Why, what has Marlene said?"

"Oh, nothing, only that she's looking at wedding dresses and wants a destination wedding somewhere in Italy."

Dorcas laughs.

"But I'm serious, you two are crazy about each other, anyone can see it."

"Yeah well," Dorcas lets out a dreamy sigh, an involuntary smile ghosts her face. "On the record, we're waiting until the heist is over to start anything serious."

"And off the record?"

"We've shagged three times in the last week and I'm also looking at a destination wedding somewhere in Italy."

James lets out a little sound of delight. "Please, please tell me I'm invited."

Dorcas lets out another laugh. "Of course you are. All of you would be. But this is so strictly hypothetical and exaggerated and off the record like you have no idea."

Now it's James' turn to let out a dreamy sigh. "I just love, love."

"You would, you sap."

"Hey, the world needs more hopeless romantics around here I think," James states assuredly.

"Speaking of hopeless romantics, how's your crush on Regulus going?" Dorcas shifts the conversation slyly.

James feels his cheeks heat up. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"You're blushing."

"I plead the fifth."

"You make it so obvious James," Dorcas shakes her head lightly. "But don't worry your secret is safe with me."

You, and Remus, and Marlene, James thinks to himself. He really needs to stop wearing his heart on his sleeve.

They go back to working in comfortable silence. Occasionally, Dorcas will point something out to him, and they'll laugh for a minute, or she'll explain something happening on a screen that looks like a foreign language to James. Unfortunately, most of her explanations go in one ear and out the other.

Sometimes, she'll lean over and ask James about what he's doing. He does his best to explain it to her, but he can tell by her facial expressions that he's doing a poor job.

When he's finished all he can for the day, he shuts down his computer and gets ready to head down to class for the afternoon. Dorcas is lost in something she's doing on one of her eight screens, so James slips out quietly and makes his way to the classroom. When he enters, he finds it empty and he frowns slightly at the dark quiet.

Regulus must have decided to end early today.

Regardless, James still wants to know what he's missed that morning, so he sets out to find Regulus. It would be way easier for James to ask Lily or Remus to explain what they had gone over that morning, but then he would have to think of another excuse to see and talk to Regulus.

James brushes past Barty on his way down the stairs. He's bounding up the steps two at a time and smells strongly of weed.

“Hey, do you know where Regulus is?”

Barty pauses, blinking slowly. “Yeah, he’s in his room. Shut himself in I think. He was in a

proper fugue state this morning for class and just cancelled everything after about an hour. I'd hold off on talking to him today unless it's an emergency or something."

James nods quickly, "Thanks."

"Yeah whatever," Barty calls over his shoulder.

James was never one to heed warnings. Especially when it comes to Regulus Black. He makes his way down the stairs and through the halls until he gets to the back part of the house where Regulus' room is tucked away.

He knocks quickly, hearing noise from inside. When there's no answer, he turns the doorknob and is surprised to find it unlocked. He feels his heartbeat quicken, knowing it was wrong to enter Regulus' room like this, but he'd already been in here once anyway. What was the harm in doing it a second time? Besides, if Regulus isn't in there, then he'll leave immediately.

He peeks his head in through the door and casts a brief look around. The door to the bathroom is open slightly and James can see Regulus in there. Quickly, he enters the room, closing the door behind him with a soft thud.

"Regulus?" He calls out, making his way over to him.

James has the sneaking suspicion that he's walked in on something he wasn't supposed to see.

No.

James knows he's just walked in on something he wasn't supposed to see. He half expects Regulus to yell, to scream at him to get out, to burst into thunderous fury. He isn't sure why he thinks this. Regulus has certainly never yelled at him before, or anyone really. He was always calm in his anger, that's why it scares everyone so much.

But Regulus doesn't yell, he doesn't even move to acknowledge James' presence. Instead, he just stands there, in the bath, motionless.

He has a painting in his hands, and it isn't particularly large, roughly the size of a textbook. He's gripping the edges of the frame so tightly that his knuckles are white and his hands are shaking as he was stares at it intensely, his mouth drawn downwards in a slight frown.

James thinks Regulus is dressed like a prince in a loose white long-sleeved shirt. It was nearly sheer, with long billowing sleeves that he's rolled up to his elbows. His trousers are also rolled up a bit at the ankles, but that doesn't matter much, as they were already drenched almost halfway up to his knees.

"I could've sold this, you know?"

It was quiet, his voice so soft that James isn't sure Regulus is talking to him at all.

He stands in the doorway, regarding Regulus carefully. The water in the bath is already spilling over the sides, creating a slight puddle on the floor tiles. It makes a steady dripping

sound along with the running water from the gushing faucet. If Regulus notices this, he certainly doesn't care.

“Regulus,” James says equally as softly, not wanting to startle him.

“I could’ve made a small fortune. I could’ve sold it and never thought about it again, but I didn’t. I wanted to keep it. I wanted to keep it and give it to him,” he lets out a noise caught between a laugh and a sob. “When the time was right.”

James kicks off his shoes and walks further into the bathroom, feeling the cool water on his feet.

“Regulus, what are you doing?” James asks softly, not wanting to sound accusatory. He looks closely at the painting in Regulus’ hands. “Degas,” James whispers, examining the pastels.

“I thought he was going to come back but now, I don’t know. I’m not sure. He told me he would never come back. I think he might have meant it. I might have ruined everything."

The water continues to rush over the side of the bath and onto the floor.

"But the other thing is, I don’t know what I would do if he did come back.”

“Regulus,” James takes another step forward. “Is it alright if I turn off the water?”

“No,” he says sharply, finally acknowledging that he can hear James. “Leave it on.”

James isn't quite sure what to do. Regulus is here, standing in front of him, clearly having some sort of breakdown, and he was well on his way to flooding the bathroom.

“Do you need me to help you somehow?” James tries, running a distressed hand through his hair.

“I’m going to drown it.”

“What?”

“The painting. That’s why I’m here. I want to drown it.”

“Oh,” James breathes out. “Okay.”

And then James takes a few self-assured strides over to the tub and gets in. The water pours over the side at the displacement as James stands across from Regulus trying not to shiver. The water is freezing, and instantly soaks the bottom of his trousers, but he does his best to acclimate quickly.

Regulus looks up at him quickly, his spell momentarily broken. “What are you doing?”

“I’m helping you drown a Degas, what does it look like I’m doing?” James answers without missing a beat.

Regulus knits his eyebrows together. “You don’t think I’m crazy?”

“Never.”

“I’m holding thirty-two million dollars in my hands right now.”

James shrugs.

“That’s it? No questions, no protests, no interrogation?”

“Nope,” James shakes his head as he tries to offer him a reassuring smile. "Unless you want me to interrogate you."

The thing about James Potter is that he has an endless capacity to care without pity. The way he's looking at Regulus is reassuring. It isn't a look of empathetic remorse, or sorrow for Regulus’ clear breakdown. It's a look that clearly says, *I’m here. Let me help, however you want me to.*

If there's one thing Regulus can't stand, it's people feeling sorry for him. Their looks of pitiful acknowledgement, their sympathetic smiles, their sad tuts, they always make him want to crawl out of his skin.

But not James. If Regulus wants to drown a painting, James didn’t care how crazy it sounded. If it could make Regulus feel better, and alleviate his mind in some way, James was ready to help.

“Do you think it was my fault?” Regulus looks at him after deliberating a moment. His eyes hold such a genuine look of sorrow, that James almost crumbles. “That he left?”

James has no idea what Regulus is talking about, no context at all, but he shakes his head quickly anyway.

“No, no it wasn’t.”

Regulus has never looked so young, standing in the freezing water that laps occasionally at his knees. James feels as if he can get a crystal clear picture of what Regulus was like when he was a small child.

Regulus knows as well that James has no idea what he's talking about. But it's nice to hear someone say that everything isn't his fault, just once. Even if it's a lie.

“Do you think he’ll come back?” The question is asked so delicately.

Regulus returns to staring at the painting.

“Who, Regulus?”

“My brother.”

James does his best to keep the surprise out of his face. Regulus isn't looking at him anymore anyway, but still.

“Oh,” he tries to speak lightly, but the word punches out of him. “Families can be difficult sometimes.”

James has always assumed Regulus was an only child. He learned from Evan that Regulus inherited a fortune from his parents, so he just assumed they were dead. But Regulus had a brother. He had a brother who left him, and he was clearly upset about it.

Regulus’ laugh brings him from his thoughts. It's an actual laugh, a shoulder shaking, eyes closed, laugh. “That is the understatement of the entire century.”

“Regulus, please let me turn off the water,” James pleads again. The entire floor is already covered, and it's making James increasingly anxious.

Regulus nods slowly, and James takes that as an okay.

Carefully, James takes a step forward and then reaches around Regulus to turn off the water.

“The funny thing is, I think you two would get along really well. It makes me hate him sort of.”

Now that the water is off, the room is a lot quieter. Regulus’ soft voice is the only thing left to echo off the walls.

James stands there, watching him carefully.

“It’s just, every time I go to drown it, to put it in the water, I want to watch all the colours run and bleed together, I want to watch the canvas get sodden and waterlogged. I want to watch it disintegrate beneath my fingers, I want to ruin it. But I can’t stop feeling like I’m going to regret it. What if I regret it? Then I can’t get it back. So I’m standing here, frozen, because I can’t make up my mind.”

“So, do it tomorrow,” James shrugs casually as if this is the most logical course of action.

“What?”

“Do it tomorrow. I’ll help you. We’ll fill up the bath and do this whole thing tomorrow, and if you still feel like you’ll regret it, then we can try again the next day. There’s no pressure to do it right this second, is there?”

Regulus blinks rapidly, looking back up at James. “No. I suppose there’s not.”

“So, tomorrow.”

Regulus nods, his grip finally loosens on the frame. “Tomorrow.”

James reaches out gently and holds the frame in both of his hands.

When Regulus lets go, and his rigid posture suddenly relaxes. A weight taken off of his shoulders, or a puppet with his strings cut.

James holds onto the painting tightly, desperately trying not to think about the fact that thirty-two million dollars hung in the balance. But clearly, this painting is worth a lot more to Regulus than that. Whatever sentimental value this work held, it was intrinsically tied to his mystery brother and their relationship.

James doesn't know if Regulus' brother will come back or not. He can't promise him that he will, and he can't say that everything will be okay like Regulus so desperately wants. All James can do is promise to stand with him in the freezing cold water every day and help Regulus do whatever he needs to do. He's glad he's managed to save the painting for another day, but if Regulus really wants to, James will ruin it in a heartbeat. To make Regulus feel better, James will do anything he asks.

"I'm going to place this in the other room, away from the water," James says softly, holding up the painting slightly.

Regulus only nods.

As carefully as he can, James lifts himself out of the bath and begins wading through the inch of water covering the floor. When he makes it to Regulus' bedroom, he sets the painting down as gently as he can on the bed. It's elevated, safe from any potential water or flooding on the floor. He keeps looking back just to make sure.

When he returns to the bathroom, he finds Regulus standing in the same place, unmoving.

James goes over and opens the drain, watching as the water slowly started to dwindle.

"I want you to know that this doesn't affect the heist," Regulus begins speaking softly after a few minutes. His voice is shaking as he tries to stand up straighter.

"I know," James reassures him.

"It doesn't mean anything. I'm fine."

"I know," James says again. "It's okay if you're not fine though. You know that, right?"

"I'm always fine."

"I know."

James thinks for a moment. "I'll be here for you though, if you're ever not fine, okay?"

Regulus contemplates this for a moment and nods.

James begins going through the cabinets as he looks for towels to sop up all the extra water on the floor.

"Are you going to tell anyone about this?" Regulus asks, barely above a whisper.

“Never,” James answers so matter-of-factly that Regulus lets out a little sigh of relief.

“We’re going to have to open the windows, get some fans in here, preferably a wet vacuum too, that way we can prevent the mouldy water smell,” James says looking around after most of the water has been mopped up.

Regulus is still standing in the bath, staring at James with an indecipherable expression.

“James?” Regulus calls, stopping James from his cleaning and his monologue. “Can you just...? Come here for a second.”

And James strides over instantly.

“Is everything okay? What’s wron-”

But before James can finish, Regulus throws his arms around him tightly.

James responds instantly by wrapping his arms around him too. At the contact, Regulus sinks into him so that James has to hold him up slightly, but he doesn't mind at all.

Oh, James thinks. *So this is what he was supposed to do. This is what his arms were made for, to hold Regulus Black for as long as he wanted. Until the last day. Until forever.*

They fit together perfectly. It was all making sense.

Regulus, too, was having his own revelation.

He's fractured, shattered into a million different little pieces, floating around everywhere, and James Potter is hugging him so tightly that all of the little fragments are putting themselves back together. He can't remember the last time he was held like this, he isn't sure he ever has been. He doesn't know if all hugs are like this, but he's pretty sure it is just the sheer will of James Potter and his magic.

“Thank you,” Regulus says, still not pulling away. “For almost drowning a Degas with me today.”

“Anytime,” James responds quickly. His head was on top of Regulus’, cheek resting in his curls. “Anytime.”

Chapter End Notes

Regulus: Sometimes I like to be a little dramatic
James: SOMETIMES?

Personally, I think a hug from James Potter could fix my entire life, but that's just me

Chapter 10: Target Practice

Chapter Summary

Traipsing, target practice, and conversation tangos.

Chapter Notes

Why did I lie and say I was going AWOL after the Choices update? Idk but I'm still crying from it and I read it seven hours ago. I will still be crying about it tomorrow.

tw: gun use/discussions of gun violence (referenced in as light of a manner as they possibly could be. that doesn't make a lot of sense, sorry)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Alright criminals and common whores,” Barty calls to all of them with a wicked gleam in his eye.

“Barty-” Regulus interjects sharply.

“He better be referring to literally anyone else but me,” Marlene grumbles, shooting him a look that could kill.

“It’s too fucking early for this,” Remus crosses his arms over his chest, also grumbling.

“Common whores was meant affectionately, sorry,” Barty grins.

They're all standing outside, even though it's still fairly cold for the time of year. They're all lined up in a single file row, almost shoulder to shoulder as they await some form of instruction. That morning, Regulus is demanding that they all follow Barty and Evan a good ways away from the property and into the vast field surrounding it. They all take a few paces away from one another, spaced out slightly so that no one is standing too close to anyone else, per Regulus’ instruction, as Barty and Evan stand in front of them. Pistols and ammunition sit lined up on a table, glinting ominously in the sunlight.

“Courtesy of me and Evan here, you all have learned how to load and unload a gun.”

“You learned how to reload one, how to hold one, and how to aim,” Evan continues.

“And now you’re going to put all of that together and practice today,” Barty exclaims happily as he gestures to the evenly spaced targets lined up behind them. Target shooting images

tacked up to individual backstops rustle in the breeze. There's one for each of them, and James stares at the outline of the human body and begins to feel slightly queasy.

“We walked you all the way out here because there’s no one around for ages so no one will be alarmed by the gunshots.”

“Yeah we’re respectful and that,” Barty adds with a grin.

James imagines Evan and Barty traipsing all the way out here to set up the targets and lay out the guns in a nice arrangement on a fold-up table and can't help but smile. There's something a little funny about that mental image- only a little.

Barty makes his way over to the table and passes out the pistols casually, flinging them into each person's hand without a care in the world.

“Now I know some of you can aim to kill,” Barty beings, putting a gun in James’ outstretched hand.

James does his best not to flinch at the weight of it.

“You go for the heart, the head.”

“That’s looking at you Dorcas and Mary,” Evan grins at them. “Remus and Marlene are to be determined.”

“And then, the rest of you are probably real pus-”

“Barty,” Regulus cuts in yet again.

“Real sentimental, you want everyone to get along, you don’t want to shoot anyone, a bunch of losers,” Barty corrects mid-sentence. “You’d wanna aim for a leg, or an arm, or a non-fatal extremity.”

“That’s you, pretty boy,” Evan says, nodding to James. “And Peter. Lily is to be determined.”

“Well, I’ll tell you one thing,” Barty drags out dramatically, “You can’t fire a gun if you’re dead. Don’t give them a chance to shoot you, that’s a mistake that could be fatal.”

“Is this really necessary?” Lily whispers next to James, holding the gun as if it would explode in her hands at any second.

Barty hands a gun to Evan and takes the last gun for himself. Quickly, he walks over to the end of the line and aims at an empty target sheet. Evan does the same.

“Doctor Peter, help us out here,” Evan calls gruffly. “What would happen if I shot someone here?” he fires the gun, causing everyone to jump.

James’ ears ring sharply as he looks at the target. It's a perfect shot, right in the head.

Peter swallows thickly, looking paler than normal. “That would be fatal on impact.”

“And here?” Barty asks, firing his gun, a hole ripping into the sheet where a human heart would be.

Another effortless shot, made with such casual indifference, James can't look away.

“Fatal,” Peter confirms again.

“Wonderful,” Evan calls out as James shudders.

“We’ll go down, person by person. Point, aim, shoot,” Barty instructs, looking as if he's taking too much enjoyment out of this.

“And please,” Evan rolls his eyes, “Aim to kill.”

“Lily, you’re up,” Barty calls as Lily assumes a proper stance.

She takes a deep, steadying breath in and out, and James prepares himself for the noise.

He still jumps when the gun fires.

Lily misses the paper entirely.

“Did you fucking close your eyes?” Evan tries to stifle a laugh while Barty cackles wildly.

“I was scared! Why the fuck do I even need to do this? Fuck!” She calls out frustratedly. Her eyes flick towards Regulus, who stands at the opposite end of the line, begging him to intervene, but he remains silent. “I was made to paint things! To paint things for fucks sake.”

“You can try again in a bit. Just watch out for the recoil, and open your eyes next time, yeah?” Barty says in between laughs. “James, your turn.”

James shakes himself out. Tries loosening his neck, unclenching his jaw. He takes aim and tries to focus. He doesn't like this one bit, or what it implies. He does his best to think of the target as just a sheet of paper, that’s what it was, but he can't help imagining another person at the other end. He understands why Lily had closed her eyes, he has a sneaking suspicion that would make it easier to actually pull the trigger.

“Breathe, Potter,” Barty instructs.

So James takes a deep breath in and fires.

Unlike Lily, he manages to hit the target, right in the arm.

“What did I fucking tell you, Crouch?”

Barty just shakes his head and laughs.

“Mary, Mary quite contrary, ready, aim, fire!”

Mary fires quickly and it lands fairly close to dead on.

Barty lets out a whistle and Mary gives a smile of satisfaction, observing where her mark had landed, just right of the heart.

“Don’t worry Lils, I’ll protect us both,” She grins, looking at Lily.

“Peter,” Evan calls out, nodding at him.

They all wait for Peter to shoot, they all listen for the sound of the gun, but nothing comes.

“Any day now,” Evan calls out again after waiting a while.

“Boom, boom, BOOM,” Barty yells loudly whilst clapping his hands together. “That’s them! That’s the guys! They’re shooting you! You’re dying! BOOM! You’re dead!”

“Ah,” Peter groans loudly, pulling the trigger. It was a perfect headshot.

“Holy shit,” Remus breathes out as everyone stares in surprise. No one looks more surprised at his success than Peter though.

“Too bad you’re already fucking dead,” Evan shakes his head with mock sympathy.

“I’m beginning to think I made a mistake letting you two do this,” Regulus mutters.

“You love us, Reggie,” Barty grins.

Regulus arches an eyebrow keenly at him, “You really want to call me Reggie when we’re surrounded by all these guns? You think that’s a smart idea?”

“No,” Barty shakes his head quickly. “Nope, sorry.”

“Okay Dorcas your turn,” Evan calls.

Dorcas fires off two shots. They both hit fairly close to the centre of the diagram. “Sorry, my finger slipped,” she mumbles lowly.

Barty and Evan share a pleased glance at one another before nodding at Remus to give it a go.

He fires and he misses. Barty and Evan shake their heads, giving him a mock look of disappointment.

“Oh for fucks sake,” Remus glares at the two of them. “I was a bloody barista before this. Fuckers,” he grumbles before standing up straighter. “Let me try again.”

“No, we’ll get back to you, let Marlene have a go.” Barty shakes his head.

Marlene tries to shoot and misses as well.

“Ugh,” she groans. “Fuck. I thought I would be good at this.”

“It’s alright, go again,” Evan calls.

“What, so she gets to go again but I don’t?” Remus scoffs indignantly.

“We’re going back down the line. You’ll be next, Jesus Christ, Lupin,” Barty sighs exasperatedly. "Let me conduct my class, would you?"

Marlene misses again. “Fuck! There’s too much pressure, I’m nervous.”

“No one’s even shooting back at you! They’re not even moving,” Evan cries out, gesturing wildly to the targets.

James hates this. He really, *really* hates this. He looks down the line at Regulus and continues to stare at him until he catches his attention. Which, thankfully, didn’t take long at all.

James gives him a look that he hopes Regulus will interpret as: *‘I feel nauseous, please let’s stop this right now.’*

Regulus stares back for a brief second before giving James a reassuring look that he hopes will say: *‘I’m sorry, but this is a necessary evil.’*

Regulus knows James understands him by the way his mouth downturns slightly

“No because why are we even having this lesson?” Remus is saying. “I’m sorry, but I don’t think a museum security guard is really locked and loaded, and I don’t really think they’d aim to kill if they were!”

Barty lets out another laugh. He and Evan seem full of those this morning.

“That’s cute,” Barty jeers. “You think we’re training you to shoot museum security?”

Evan shales his head clicking his tongue. “Stealing the paintings from the museum is the least dangerous part of this entire heist. Selling these paintings? That’s the issue.”

“Most buyers want to see the paintings in person, authenticate them with their own eyes, as if they know anything about art,” Barty explains condescendingly. “They bring their cash, to buy the painting which also means they bring their men to make sure we don’t cheat them and take the cash and the painting and run. It’s all very under the table.”

“The men we’re selling to, they’re the dangerous ones. Cartel leaders, mafia members, arms dealers, hit men, the list is long. They don’t trust you, they shoot. They get scared, they shoot. They have doubts, they shoot,” Evan continues.

“They use the paintings as collateral for illegal business deals, to barter-”

“Alright enough,” Regulus waves his hand dismissively, cutting Barty off.

“Yes, I forgot,” Barty turns to Regulus, “You never did like to hear about the aftermath of the deal. Always like to think the paintings are all hanging up in a nice house somewhere, where they can still be observed and admired.”

“Barty, *enough*.”

The rest of the group falls solemnly quiet, reeling from the impact of Barty and Evan's words. It makes sense. Of course it makes sense. They are committing a crime, they'll have to sell the art to criminals, but still, it was a fact that left everybody slightly rattled.

"Remus, fire at the target or forfeit your turn," Evan speaks again, and Remus fired.

They go back and forth like this all morning until it's time for lunch, all of them returning much quieter than usual.

That evening, James is on a mission. A selfish mission, but a mission nonetheless. He has decided that he'll let Regulus come to him if he wants to try to drown the painting again. All day Regulus seemed fine, and James tries to reconcile the image he has of Regulus in his head from yesterday, the Regulus who was white-knuckled and shaky-voiced, with the Regulus in front of him now. Calm, collected, commanding. It's as if nothing at all had happened, but James knows something *had* happened.

Which is why James is on a mission.

He's on cooking duty, along with Lily and Peter. They all had finally rotated out their assigned chores, and because Lily and Peter and James could all cook rather well, they decided to split meals. Lily takes breakfast, Peter takes lunch, and James takes dinner. They all help buy groceries and clean when necessary.

James has actually had this mission planned for a while, now is just a perfect time to execute it.

He stands in the kitchen that night mixing and baking and folding. He taste-tests and experiments slightly and when he is sure that everything is as perfect as he can possibly get it, he plates.

Everyone is already sitting at the table, waiting expectantly for dinner, and they turn to him when he walks out. He puts one platter down at one end of the table and another platter down at the other end of the table and sits in his seat smiling at his accomplishment.

"Where's the rest of it?" Evan asks, the first one to speak.

"This is it," James smiles.

"You made…muffins? For dinner?" Lily asks gently.

"Yep."

"They smell really great, James," Peter smiles, taking one off the tray and putting it on his plate. "They're still warm."

"But this is… it?" Mary asks, eyeing the muffins warily.

"Yeah, breakfast for dinner type thing," James clarifies again.

“Okay, but that’s usually for things like eggs and toast and bacon and pancakes and other things,” Remus is looking at James confusedly. Actually, most of them are looking at James confusedly, but he doesn't care.

“You don’t have to eat them then. I promise, tomorrow, dinner will be back to normal, just eat my muffins and be happy for tonight,” James shakes his head.

Everyone turns to Regulus, and when they sense that he would make no protest on their behalf, they all begin grabbing muffins from the trays.

James watches as Regulus takes one for himself and bites into it. As soon as he does, his eyes snap to where James is sitting.

James only smiles at Regulus in response.

Regulus reaches to grab another one and another one and another one. He balances all three muffins on his plate, not because he wants to eat them all at that very moment, but because he wants to save some for later. To ensure there are some left after dinner was over.

Orange muffins. That idiot had made him orange muffins for dinner.

James’ eyes are constantly darting across the table to look at Regulus and the soft smile he tries to hide the entire evening.

James is going to consider his mission a smashing success, and he wears a contented smile right up until he was ready for bed, when a knock at his door makes him get up.

“Regulus,” he blinks when he opens the door, actually taking off his glasses and cleaning them on his shirt before he puts them back on his face-just to be sure.

Regulus stands in the doorway, almost looking surprised that James answered.

“It’s late.”

“Yeah,” James agrees. “It is late.”

Regulus just stares at him.

“Is this a proposition?” James smirks, trying to fill the silence. “Are you trying to proposition me right now?”

Regulus promptly turns on his heel and begins walking back down the hallway.

“Shit, Regulus, sorry. It was a joke,” James runs out after him, still smiling lightly. “Come on. Come back in,” he whispers, trying not to alert the others.

Regulus stops, facing away from James, before he lets out an exaggerated sigh. He seemed to debate something with himself before he turns around again, heading back into James’ room.

James sits down at the end of his bed and pats the spot next to him for Regulus to sit.

Regulus closes the door quietly behind him and sits down carefully, slightly unsure of himself.

James looks down and sees one of his muffins in Regulus' hand.

In case he missed it, Regulus holds it up to him, waving it in front of his face. “You’ve got to stop doing this,”

“Doing what?” James asks, trying his best not to smile.

Regulus lets out a little sigh and looks up at the ceiling in frustration. “Being you. You’ve got to stop being you. Be someone else."

“And who would you rather I be instead? Just name it, say the word and I’ll be it.”

Regulus flops over on the bed and buries his face in James’ pillow, letting out a muffled noise James can't quite distinguish. It sounds light, like a small, soft scream.

“You’re doing this on purpose,” he mumbles into the pillow. He's holding the muffin slightly above him, so it doesn't get crumbs on James’ bed.

James likes this Regulus best. This is the Regulus who talks to him about Andy Warhol and laughs at James’ stories in the museum. This is the Regulus who likes snakes and the colour green and orange muffins.

“I am not doing anything,” James chuckles softly shaking his head as Regulus sits up again.

“And I am not propositioning you. I just came here to say thank you, for the-for dinner. And that I feel like I owe you an explanation for yesterday,” he says this second part more quietly.

“You don’t owe me anything, Regulus. It’s okay if you don’t want to talk about it.”

Regulus seems confused by this and frowns slightly.

“I mean I’m here, obviously, if you want to talk about it. I’m here to listen, to help, but you don’t have to. You have no obligation to,” James clarifies quickly.

“I tell you I have a brother, and I want to drown a painting, and ramble in incoherent sentences, all whilst standing in a freezing cold tub, that you jumped into, and you tell me I owe you nothing?”

“That’s right. You don’t.”

James is looking at Regulus so sincerely. His brown eyes search his face ever so carefully, taking in all his features. *Safe.* James says he doesn't want anything from him, isn't going to use it against him, and has no hidden motives. If Regulus makes the incredibly stupid decision to believe him, to trust him, then isn’t that what it means? *Safe.*

What is safe, really? To someone like him? To a person who lives a life as he does?

Easy, a small voice inside of him says. *Safe is someone who stands with you in the freezing waters of your own misery and then makes you orange muffins afterwards.*

“Regulus,” James says softly. James is always so soft with him. Regulus can't remember the last person who was. “You okay?”

Regulus nods slowly.

“Do you want me to go fill the bath? You can grab the painting.”

“You really meant that?”

James continues to stare at him.

“When you said that you’d come back tomorrow?”

“I really meant that,” James answers back so quickly that Regulus feels his heart skip slightly.

“No,” he whispers after a few moments. “No, I think I’m going to hold onto it a little longer actually.”

James nods. “You promise you’ll tell me if you change your mind?”

“Yes.”

James holds out his pinky finger and Regulus stares at it.

“Well don’t just stare at it,” James smiles after a minute.

“What do you want me to do here?” Regulus continues looking down at James’ outstretched pinky finger.

“You have to pinky promise.”

“Are we five?”

“Regulus, give me your damn pinky.”

Regulus rolls his eyes and shifts his orange muffin to his other hand so he can link pinkies with James Potter. What an incredibly ridiculous evening this has been.

“Good, now that we’ve made the unbreakable vow, now I can sleep easy,” James grins.

“The unbreakable vow?” Regulus scoffs, biting into the muffin finally.

“I take pinky promises very seriously around here.”

“Hmm,” Regulus hums, nodding.

“If you break your promise that means I have to cut off your pinky,” James says warningly.

“I’d like to see you fucking try.” Regulus smiles.

They sit in silence as Regulus finishes eating the muffin.

“Your muffins are actually spectacular, by the way,” he says when he's finished.

James grins. “Is that some kind of euphemism?”

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” Regulus deadpans. “What would that even be a euphemism for? Explain it to me.”

“I don’t know,” James shrugs dramatically, “You’re the one who said it, you tell me!”

“This is what happens when I try to be nice,” Regulus groans.

James smiles and Regulus smiles back at him, despite himself. It's a beautiful sight.

James has the strong urge to wrap his arms around Regulus, to pull him close to his chest, and never let him go. He knows it was bad, he knows he's in deep, too deep, but he doesn't care. How can he, when Regulus is sitting, on his bed, smiling at him, with a genuine smile? One that reaches his eyes, and makes them light up?

“Stop looking at me like that,” Regulus speaks quietly. “Stop being you.”

“You first,” James replies back.

They sit like this for a minute more before Regulus finally stands up.

James wants to say something to keep him there, in his room, but he knows it isn't feasible. At least tonight it isn't.

“I’m gonna go. Sorry to keep you up,” Regulus calls softly, already opening the door.

James smiles as Regulus closes the door quietly behind him.

Eventually, James turns off the light and crawls into bed. And even though Regulus has left his bedroom long ago and made his way downstairs, James lets the memory of Regulus in his room linger softly until he falls asleep.

Chapter End Notes

More soft jegulus content because it’s what we all deserve!

Also I've noticed a few people say they didn't know there was a mcd tag and I added it to the main tags now as well so it should be in two places now on this fic (it was

originally only in the warnings section of this fic), but I just want everyone to know there very much is a mcd tag. I don't want to catch anyone by surprise!

thank you all for reading, I adore you lots! mwah!

Chapter 11: Defender of Love (and lovers everywhere)

Chapter Summary

Don't annotate in the margins.

Chapter Notes

this chapter is brought to you by two large thai iced coffees and a redbull

It’s finals for me so if this chapter isn’t the best i am going to apologise in advance! I've just been *insert short circuit noises here*
Also not sure why it's so easy for me to crank out 15 pages of this fic but it takes me EONS to write a 10 page essay for class,,, that seems,,, not fair

See the end of the chapter for more notes

To say things were going bad for Sirius Black would be an understatement. For starters, he was drugged by his own brother. That honestly should’ve been rock bottom for him, but he wasn’t even as mad about that as he should be. He wished that it had surprised him more, but it didn’t. He was ready to move on from that unfortunate incident, at least he’d be prepared for next time.

Next time. Now that was what really fucking bothered Sirius. Regulus’ words echoed in his brain. Incessantly rattling against his skull, *‘We’ll speak again soon. I’ll find you.* ’ It made his blood sizzle, his jaw clench, and his shoulders tighten. That smug bastard. He knew what he was doing.

Sirius had spent years of his life and dedicated numerous hours to finding Regulus. It was his job, it was what he was supposed to be best at, and it was a source of pride for him. But Regulus had instantly done what Sirius hadn’t been able to do. Regulus found him. Regulus had found him without so much work as lifting a finger. Now Sirius was the one looking over his shoulder, staring down dark-haired strangers in the street, and dead bolting his door at night. It was supposed to be the other way around and Sirius was furious.

The other thing is that Regulus was right. He was always right, in the cold, callous, way. Sirius was chasing dead ends. Dead end after dead end while he followed Regulus into different countries and time zones, literally across oceans. What did he have to show for it? Maybe he was, as Regulus put it, wasting his life.

And then there was the matter of Orion and Walburga Black. They were dead. Sirius tried to make himself feel something. He looked into himself and screamed it into the cavern in his chest. They were dead. His parents were dead. His voice echoed off the walls and bounced off his hollow bones, but he still felt nothing. The impact was lost in the cavern of himself somewhere.

Sirius tried to think of a happy memory of his parents, just a single one, to focus on. Surely thinking about that would make him feel sad. But there were no happy memories, just his father's incessant screams, his mother's cruel gaze, both of their unfeeling indifference. Sirius was only worth what he could do for them. If he wasn't useful, if they weren't actively maximising their benefits from his existence, they couldn't care less if he lived or died. Apathy begets apathy he supposed.

What he wasn't apathetic about was the fact that his brother didn't tell him. He didn't call, or email, or write. He proved himself capable of finding Sirius, he just didn't want to. He didn't think Sirius was worth it. They grew up in that house together, side by side. Sirius remembers the days under his father's harsh instruction; learning to fire a gun before he knew multiplication. Learning how to avoid trip wires, how to crack safes, and how to look for silent alarms, while everyone else his age was joining sports teams and learning to read. He was the one who fought for Regulus to attend school more frequently, actual school, with children his own age. He was the one who calmed him down after his mother went on one of her particularly harsh tirades. He snuck Regulus food when his father locked him in his room until he could learn how to pick a lock. He was more of a parent than they ever had been. He didn't fucking get it. And he didn't fucking get why that hurt so much more.

He was in a new hotel, courtesy of Alice, and while he tried to downplay the series of events that happened in the previous hotel room, Alice made him take the week off from work. He hadn't even mentioned the paralytic. It was probably the whole dead parents' thing that did it. He went over and over that conversation with Regulus in his mind, analysing every detail, going frame by frame to see if Regulus had slipped up somehow, revealing something he shouldn't have, saying something that would get him caught. Dead. End.

He couldn't think about Regulus' proposition either. The idea that he even thought Sirius would join him was absurd. He was just an extension of Walburga and Orion now. He was lost. He had been since he left Sirius that night.

But he called for help, a small voice in his head said. *He probably broke all of Orion's rules and called Andromeda to help. Doesn't that mean something?* Sirius smothered that voice.

Pandora and Frank wouldn't talk to him about work no matter how many times he called, or texted, or emailed. They often checked in on him, asked how he was, tried to get him to go out after work, but Sirius wouldn't indulge them if they wouldn't talk about the case.

Oh, and to top it all off, Remus' flowers were dying. This was rock bottom.

Remus was rapidly becoming one of the best things in Sirius' life. Sirius found himself texting Remus an embarrassing amount. It's a good thing Sirius had no shame. The other thing is that Remus would respond to every single message, and every time he did, Sirius' heart would flutter and he would grin foolishly to himself. He could read the words in Remus'

voice and imagine him saying them. Sometimes Remus would call, and that would be even better. It was always late at night though, and Sirius would stay up until an ungodly hour just to be sure he didn't miss a call by accident.

In the week he had off from work, he went to the museum whenever Remus was there and annoyed him constantly. He would follow him around the galleries, ask him a million questions, and urge him to take his break way earlier than he was supposed to so they could go out back and snog relentlessly for a few minutes. For what it was worth, Remus didn't seem to be that annoyed by it at all. In fact, he said it made the time go by much quicker.

What exactly he was doing with Remus was another question entirely. There was no doubt in Sirius' mind that he was falling for Remus, he knew that the minute he saw him. But as far as the logistics were concerned, Sirius had no fucking idea what to do. Eventually, he'd have to go home, and Remus lived here, he was a student, and he had plans to pursue a PhD. Would they be able to do long distance? Could Sirius apply to transfer to the Art Crimes division here, in America?

He shook his head to clear his thoughts. They weren't even officially dating yet, this mode of thinking was pointless to entertain. These were the kind of no-good thoughts that plagued his brain when he wasn't at work.

Wasting his life, Sirius scoffed. He certainly was not wasting his life. *Right?*

—---

"You're in here a lot." The sound of Regulus' voice made Remus snap the book he was reading closed.

"Sorry, I can leave if you'd like."

Regulus shook his head, "No. Please, stay. It's nice that someone else is making use of the library."

Remus offered a weak smile in response. Regulus walked around the small room observing the books on the shelf, and Remus watched him from the chair he was sitting in.

"What book are you reading," Regulus nodded to the book that was obscured in Remus' lap.

This was odd. Regulus didn't strike Remus as the type to make casual conversation just for the sake of it. He almost had the urge to ask Regulus what he really wanted.

"Oh um," Remus glanced down at the book, "Anna Karenina."

"Oh you're a Tolstoy fan?" Regulus stared at him.

Remus couldn't see how James was so smitten with Regulus. He was too hard to read. Everything with him felt like a test. It put Remus on edge.

"I'm trying to be," he answered honestly.

Regulus nodded before turning back to the bookshelf.

“I see your annotations in it. Is it a favourite of yours?” Remus spoke after a minute of silence. He couldn’t help it, Regulus made him nervous. His silence made him nervous.

He shrugged before turning back around to face Remus, “I like the explorations of extremes in it.”

Remus nodded. “Vengeance is mine; I will repay,” He quoted a line that Regulus had circled multiple times.

“Yeah, this idea of vengeance but then also forgiveness. These two extremes guide every character in that novel. They are the lens through which each person operates.”

“If you forgive, you forgive completely,” Remus quoted another line that Regulus had circled.

“Yes,” Regulus said more quietly. “Vengeance or total forgiveness, these are the two extremes Tolstoy grapples with, and yet no one in the novel is entirely good or entirely bad either. Good, bad, innocent, guilty, saved, condemned. In this world with such extremes, Tolstoy still grants his characters the ability to operate in the in-betweens.”

“Hmm,” Remus hummed, listening to Regulus. “I haven’t quite learned how to forgive completely yet I don’t think.”

“No, I don’t think I have either.”

Perhaps this was a moment of understanding between the two of them.

"There are instances in which I want vengeance and people want vengeance from me," Regulus said, postulating.

Remus understood this and nodded, "I want to forgive, yet find myself incapable."

"Exactly," Regulus snapped his fingers. "It's nice to know we're not alone in that. Even all those years ago Tolstoy understood."

Remus nodded quickly. "We operate in the grey. In the inbetween."

Regulus' expression shifted slightly, to one of curiosity and regard.

“You know,” Remus said, pushing his luck slightly, “you should get a journal to write your thoughts down in, instead of using the margins.”

“Why would I do that,” Regulus raised a curious eyebrow at him.

“Because anyone can read your thoughts now. They get a glimpse into your mind, they see what you think is important, how you view the world.”

Regulus seemed to think about this for a moment before he spoke again. “No one’s ever cared enough to read my books, let alone the annotations. I suppose I’ve never had to think about that before. Besides, it’s easier to know what I’m referencing when I’m staring right at it. Seems a bit much to pull out a separate journal and go side by side in two books.”

“Oh,” Remus blinked.

“Do you find my arguments compelling at least,” Regulus asked, staring at Remus with a softer neutrality and a slight gleam in his eyes.

“Oh yeah, most of them. Especially what you write about Russian Society and jealousy. I can’t tell if those thoughts are my own fully formed opinions from the text, or your annotated arguments shining through and convincing me. But some of the stuff written in here is confusing,” Remus explained.

“Like what?” Regulus seemed genuinely interested in the conversation at hand now.

The corners of Remus’ mouth twitched up slightly, “well, the ball scene for example. You underline Vronsky and Anna’s first dance but the only thing that’s in the margins are tiny hearts.”

Regulus’ eyes widened a comical amount.

“I’d love to hear your wonderful insight,” Remus said with as straight of a face as he could manage. “Considering it is a pivotal moment in the novel.”

“You’re not allowed to read my books anymore,” Regulus responded quickly with a flat tone, but his eyes were still wide. “I did that when I was young. You know what, it doesn’t matter. You’re only allowed to read books I haven’t annotated,” Regulus said firmly, snatching the book from Remus’ lap before he could protest.

“No,” Remus cried, “I was just getting to the good part!”

Regulus stalked quickly over to the shelf of books and pulled out another one. He plopped it in Remus’ lap and Remus saw that it was another copy of Anna Karenina. He flipped through the pages. It was an unannotated copy of Anna Karenina.

Regulus held the annotated one firmly in one arm, close to his chest as if Remus would try to jump up and grab it any moment.

“This wouldn’t have happened if you kept a journal to record your thoughts,” Remus grumbled slightly, trying to find the page he left off on in the new copy.

To his surprise, Regulus almost gave him a smile. He looked as if he were about to say something else, but then Remus’ phone buzzed in his pocket.

Something in Regulus’ face changed instantly, and he was back to that cool look of indifference as his eyes darted to Remus’ pocket where the noise had come from.

Remus tried to act as casually as possible. He knew who it was, of course, and no chance in hell was he going to pull his phone out and look at it. He tried to open his book again and pretend as if he didn't hear it. He hoped that Regulus would move on.

"Aren't you going to answer that?" Regulus' voice was steady.

Remus' heart beat wildly in his chest as he worked on keeping his face as neutral as possible.

"Only because it has to be someone in the house right?," Regulus continued, his voice deadly calm. It reminded Remus of the stillness of a viper, right before it strikes. "Since it's against the rules to give out your number."

Regulus eyed him, his gaze burning into Remus. Carefully, and more slowly than he should've, he reached into his pocket to pull out his phone.

"Oh right, sorry," Remus willed himself to keep his hands and his voice steady. "It's just, we all live together so I don't really check my phone when one of the others texts. If they needed something they'd find me," Remus borrowed a line he'd heard from James.

This, however, did not have the intended effect on Regulus that Remus was trying to achieve. Instead, Regulus' eyes narrowed, "My thoughts exactly."

Well, it's now or never. Maybe Regulus would take pity on him and just kick him off the team. Maybe Remus would be able to go home and resume his life as a barista. He'd never be able to go back to school, but that seemed way better than being murdered. Maybe if he screamed loud enough for James, he could run down the stairs and intervene before Regulus strangled him to death.

I mean it's not like Remus was a narc. He had just been talking to some nice boy he met in a museum. It's not like he had told Sirius anything about the heist or his real life or anything. Sirius thought he was a fucking American. Surely that had to count for something. If Remus just explained everything, fully, maybe Regulus would understand.

He felt the blood in his veins go cold as he flipped open his phone and opened the message. Regulus was standing across from him, watching him carefully. Remus didn't dare to breathe.

At the sight of the message, he had to stop himself from smiling in relief. It was a message from Mary:

'Lils and I are in the studio. U said U wanted to see last time. Come on up!'

"It's from Mary. She wanted to let me know she's working with Lily in the studio right now, in case I wanted to come up," Remus explained, when he finally trusted himself to speak. He turned the phone screen to Regulus to show him as proof.

Regulus gave a curt nod without hardly checking, “You can never be too careful.”

“No, I understand,” Remus said quickly, powering his phone off quickly. “I want you to know you can trust me though.”

Regulus’ expression was neutral.

“I would never do anything to jeopardise the heist,” Remus continued.

“You and James are close,” Regulus finally spoke, his eyes still not leaving Remus’.

Remus sputtered in confusion at the change of conversation. “Y-yes. We’re- he’s my best friend. We’d be lost without each other I think,” Remus answered honestly. Too honestly, but he was still anxious and coming down from the adrenaline rush.

“Hmm,” Regulus frowned slightly. “Enjoy the book,” he said finally, breaking his stare and walking out of the room.

Remus sat completely still for a few minutes after Regulus had left, trying to get his heart rate back down to a reasonable number, and then once he was sure he had calmed down slightly he bounded up the stairs and knocked quickly on James’ door before entering.

James looked up from his bed, he was lying down on his back throwing a ball into the air and catching it in his hands. “Oh, Remus. Hi.”

“Expecting someone else,” Remus asked, raising an eyebrow.

“No. Are you okay? You look like you’ve seen a ghost,” James sat up quickly, concern immediately flooding his features.

“Oh you know, I almost got murdered by your fucking boyfriend downstairs tonight. Life flashed before my eyes and all that so, no, not really.”

“I- Regulus isn’t-we’re not,” James stuttered out. “I mean he’s not,”

“Would you stop?” Remus cut in sharply. “Really not the fucking part you should be focusing on right now.”

“What happened?”

So Remus took a seat, right on the floor, and told James of his brief brush with death.

“What if I talk to him or something,” James said when Remus had finished recounting the conversation. “Convince him to change his rules, or to overlook it this once.”

“Yeah fucking right. Like you could convince Regulus to become a more lenient and understanding person,” Remus snorted doubtfully.

James looked at Remus with an expression he couldn’t quite place. “It’s not fair! Everyone here is breaking rules left and right, you should be able to as well.”

Remus shrugged. A long stretch of silence filled the room as they both contemplated the situation before them.

“What are you going to do,” James asked quietly after a while.

“The logical thing to do would be to end it,” Remus answered, hating the way his voice cracked slightly at the proposition. He had thought about it, ending it with Sirius, but he just couldn’t bring himself to really consider it, even now. “I mean it makes sense, it’s too much of a risk. This is the second time Regulus has been suspicious of me, I don’t know. I feel like I’m pushing my luck too much.”

James shook his head quickly. “No.”

“No?”

“No, you can’t end it. You come home and talk to me and Peter incessantly about him and you smile so big it makes my face hurt. You laugh when you mention him, and you blush. He makes you so happy Remus.”

“I know,” he said softly. “But-”

“You deserve to be happy Remus. You deserve to be that happy, all of the time,” James said firmly. “Do you want to end it with Sirius?”

Remus shook his head, “no. No, I really, really don’t.”

“Then you’re just going to have to get better at hiding it,” James responded, nodding to himself. His eyebrows were furrowed in concentration, and then he jumped up from the bed and began rummaging around in his rooms.

He brought a pen and paper to Remus. “Okay here’s what you’re going to do. You’re going to write down his number on this paper and we’ll keep it here, in my room, under my mattress. You’ll need to delete any texts or calls from Sirius on your phone and erase his contact from your phone. If Regulus is as suspicious as you say, we can’t be too careful. Delete your messages as soon as you send them, turn your phone off completely whenever you know you'll be around Regulus for a while, and fucking take it off vibrate.”

Remus followed all of the instructions as James rattled them off.

“Also, Regulus is going to an auction soon, and I reckon he’ll be out for a good portion of the evening so you can plan a date with Sirius then. I’m not sure exactly when the auction is yet, but he said he’d tell me a few days before, so I’ll let you know when he does.”

“And why would Regulus let you know about his plans,” Remus asked watching the blush grow on James’ cheeks.

“Oh, because I’m going with him,” James answered, running his fingers nervously through his hair.

Remus blinked rapidly. “That fucking hypocrite. You mean to tell me your little crush has been mutual this entire time? Or course it has. Of course, Regulus says ‘we need to trust each other blindly’ and ‘no relationships’ but that doesn’t apply to him does it?” Remus was mad, he could feel himself getting angrier by the nanosecond. “He’s allowed to do whatever the fuck he wants.”

“No, Remus no. It’s not like that. It’s a work thing,” James tried to assuage him quickly.

“A work thing? Like that museum outing you were obsessing over?" Remus asked sharply. "Oh, you're fucking kidding me. That was actually a date too wasn't it? I have to be honest I didn't expect Regulus to break his own rules so quickly, but hey-"

“Stop it," James interjected harshly. "It was a work outing. The museum and the auction, all right? Not that it's any of your business. I was working on moving money for him, to spend at this auction and he invited me to go. That’s all.”

Now James was getting increasingly annoyed. Maybe Remus did have a point, but he was getting mad at the wrong person.

“You were blushing.”

“Yeah well I fucking like him now don’t I,” James huffed. “Not like that part’s ever been a secret.”

Remus eyed James up and down. “But he doesn’t reciprocate? It’s still very much one-sided?”

James blinked thinking back to the night of the party.

“Do you want to kiss me, Regulus?”

“James.”

“Look, I’m not going to sit here and be interrogated,” James grumbled crossing his arms defensively. “You came to me for help and I helped. You’re welcome.”

Remus’ anger subsided quickly. James was right, all he was trying to do was help. And they were all trying to break the rules, it wasn't James' fault that he was trying to break them with Regulus. “I’m sorry, James. Thank you.” He nodded at him. “Really,” he added, feeling a bit bad. “I owe you.”

“No you don’t,” James grinned, already accepting Remus’ apology immediately after it was issued. “Just call me James Potter the defender of love and lovers everywhere,” he made a dramatic sprawling motion with his arms that caused Remus to smile.

“I never said anything about being in love with the guy,” Remus clarified quickly.

“That’s because you’re emotionally repressed a little in the love department, but that’s okay.”

“I am not emotionally repressed in the love department,” Remus cried indignantly.

“We’ve been friends for how long?”

“Years,” Remus supplied quickly.

“And how many times do I tell you I love you?” James asked, raising his eyebrows.

“Every time you hang up the phone, every time I make a really funny joke, every holiday, especially Christmas,” Remus was prattling on.

“Exactly, and you tell me like once a year. Twice maybe,” James grinned at him.

“That...that doesn’t mean that I don’t love you,” Remus looked sheepishly at the floor.

“You are proving my point exactly right now Lupin.”

Remus let out a groan.

“Besides I know you love me, you don’t have to say it,” James supplied simply. “I don’t ever doubt it for a second.”

Remus smiled. “Okay, okay I’m leaving now. But I want you to know, I’m fully expecting you to save my life if I get caught.”

“You won’t get caught,” James grinned back at him.

“Scary thing is, I think he’s worth it. He's worth Regulus’ rage, death even. Maybe I don’t know.”

“Must be some leather jacket,” James joked.

“You have no idea,” Remus opened the door and paused slightly. “Good night James Potter, defender of love and lovers everywhere.”

Remus closed the door behind him and made his way to his own room. He would have to be more careful now than ever, but he just had to make it through the heist. Once it was over, he would find Sirius, and they would be together, properly. He smiled at the thought. It was a half-baked plan, but a plan nonetheless.

Chapter End Notes

I do want to say that everyone commenting nice things about this fic genuinely make my entire day/year/life. Like I smile to myself all day like a dork thinking about them. I cannot thank you enough for reading my fun little story my brain thought up <333

Remus: Your boyfriend almost killed me today btw
James blushing profusely: omg Regulus is NOT my boyfriend, it's not even like that idk what you're talking about
Remus: hmm but yet you knew it was Regulus I was referring too...also NOT THE POINT

Chapter 12: I hate Picasso

Chapter Notes

> Can I preface by saying I use something called intuitive grammar,,, commas are there to add flavour, to indicate natural pauses in speech, and to just be there hanging out in the sentence lmaooo sorry. I have never in my life heard of being grammatically correct lmaoo
>
> This chapter is hella short too, so sorry but NEXT CHAPTER WON'T BE AH! <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When James filed into the makeshift classroom he saw a few things had changed since the previous lesson. The desks were pushed further into the centre of the room and propped up against the walls of the room sat objects of various sizes covered in white sheets.

"Take a seat," Regulus instructed as everyone filed in. Mary and Lily took a stand at the front of the classroom with Regulus.

"As you know, a key component of the task we have at hand is the artwork that we will be taking. Works that are too famous won't sell, and works that aren't famous enough, also won't sell. We're looking for notoriety sure, but it's important that we look for quality over quantity. Who can tell me why?" Regulus asked, his eyes scanning the room.

"It's harder for me and Marlene to move a ton of art quickly and without mistakes," Remus began.

"Right or without being caught," Marlene nodded, agreeing with Remus.

"Sure, that's part of it," Regulus contented.

"Well if you want notoriety," Dorcas began, "then the quality of the work matters. No one cares if you steal a bunch of paintings by a no-named artist, besides the insurance company, maybe. But if you steal a Courbet for example, it would be a big deal. Because he was the father of naturalism in art history. A pioneer for the movement."

"Yeah," Peter nodded in agreement. "Even the least well-known Vermeer is worth millions because there are so few Vermeers in the world."

"Thirty-six Vermeers," Regulus nodded in encouragement. "So it's not about stealing the most well-known works, or cleaning out the entire museum, it's about carefully picking works that will add up to large sums of money, but are, priceless in what they offer the art world and the public. That's how we achieve notoriety. That's how we become known for the biggest art heist in the world."

“People will care because they’ll feel like we’ve stolen something personal from them, a piece of history,” Peter murmured.

“I don’t get it, a majority of those people would never go to the museum to see the paintings we’re stealing,” Barty scoffed, crossing his arms and leaning back in his desk.

“It doesn’t matter,” Regulus looked at him with a gleam of excitement in his eyes, “it’s the idea that they had the opportunity to see them, and now they know they never will. They’re mad at the lost possibility.”

“That’s what outrages most people anyway,” James chimed in. “It’s not the act itself but what you could’ve done. All the futures you could’ve had, all the plans you could’ve made, they get stolen from you. That’s why people cry when they don’t get into the university of their dreams, it’s not necessarily what they lost, but all the things that can now never happen.”

“Yeah,” Remus added, “Like now they’ll never be able to see the painting that inspired the naturalism movement in art, even if they never wanted to before. That’s what gets people talking.”

“Precisely,” Regulus agreed. “This is the crux of the heist. For some of you, I suppose it’s about money. Well, for most of you,” Regulus clarified as a few people chuckled. “But there is something important about seeing beyond the monetary gain, and seeing the power behind it all.”

“The power to give and take,” James murmured, remembering an early conversation he’d had with Evan. “To give and take possibilities, to hold the past in your hands.”

Regulus nodded slowly, his eyes never leaving James’, “That’s why I do it.”

“Right, will someone explain to me what paintings we are stealing already,” Evan muttered with a bored sigh. “Some of us are really only here for the money.”

“I hope we steal a Picasso. I fucking hate Picasso,” Marlene cried out passionately. “Did you know, when I was working at the museum one day, they did a tour and they were talking about Picasso, so I decided to listen in because I was bored out of my mind, and that guy was a real dick.” Regulus blinked cooly at Marlene’s outburst. “No really, he said that all women are machines for suffering, he locked up his girlfriend when he left the house, and was horrible to every woman he was with. We should take all of his art out of the museums if you ask me!”

"Oh, I agree," Lily called out, equally as passionate.

"No, he apparently was horrible to everyone, but especially women. He literally used them all up and spat them out. And," Marlene stated matter-of-factly, "his art is ugly."

“Yeah,” Dorcas called out supportively. “What a dick!”

“We’re not stealing any Picasso’s,” Mary sighed from where she was still standing at the front.

“Oh, well Regulus if you could just add it to the list,” Marlene turned to him.

“Not happening,” he said flatly turning to Mary and Lily. “Please, the class is yours.”

"We can talk about it later," Marlene added lowly.

Lily let out a little squeal of excitement as Regulus took a seat at one of the empty desks, but not just any empty desk. Regulus took a seat right next to James. That was a first.

James pretended that was completely fine with him and sat up a little straighter, attempting to give his undivided attention to Lily and Mary.

“So, all of you know by now, but Mary and I have been working tirelessly day in and day out to replicate paintings at Regulus’ command.”

“And we love it,” Mary added smiling. “And we’re so excited to show you what we’ve been working on.”

“Wait, wait, but what good is replacing the real paintings with the exact replications of the fake ones?” Barty called out. "What is the point?"

“It buys us time and obscures our timeframe,” Regulus called from next to James. “We need to get those paintings out of the country to sell them. It’s very difficult to do that when news of our theft is plastered on every radio station, newspaper, and television broadcast. When the time is right, I’ll tip the museum off. No one will have any idea exactly when the paintings were stolen or how they were stolen, if we do this right.”

“Right, now as we were saying,” Lily began again, walking over to one of the sheet-covered objects. “Mary and I will reveal the paintings.”

Lily pulled off the white sheet with a sweeping gesture to reveal a portrait of a lady in a blue hat. She was wearing a white frilly dress and staring off into the distance. Both girls took a moment to admire their work proudly.

“George Romney, English portrait painter. He’s an old master. This is his portrait of Caroline Price done in 1774,” Mary explained.

“Well, it was actually painted a few weeks ago, but you get the idea,” Lily interjected.

“We reckon, and by we I mean Regulus, but we reckon we can get 1.4 million for this one,” Mary continued, smiling at the shocked reaction from the group.

“This one,” Lily pulled off another sheet covering a painting lined up against the wall, “this one is a Peter Doig. Modern, done in 1959. We think we get 11.2 million for it, maybe 11.5 million.”

James looked at it closely. It was a smattering of lines and colours that appeared almost abstract at first glance, but after looking at it for a moment, James could make out a house in the background. He then could tell the smattering of lines were tree branches and he was looking at the house through the heavy foliage.

Lily and Mary went through each of the paintings, explaining little details about each work and talking about particularly difficult processes to duplicate.

At one point, when everyone was absorbed in Mary and Lily's discussion Regulus leaned in closely to whisper in James' ear, "shouldn't you be taking notes or something?"

He was so close that James could feel his curls brush his cheek and he did his best not to yelp in surprise. He was actually tempted to lean in, to tilt his head just ever-so-slightly towards Regulus, but he had already pulled away.

"No. I'm fine," James gulped slightly, risking a tiny glance at Regulus.

James thought it was odd how everyone had paid no mind to them, still entranced in whatever Lily was talking about. How could they not have noticed that time stood absolutely still for a small moment, how could they not have noticed the world stopped rotating for a brief second?

Regulus was staring at him with the smallest of smirks on his face, "Alright then."

When Mary and Lily had finished unveiling each painting and talking about them at length, Regulus resumed his position at the front of the classroom and began teaching again.

"Mary and Lily are still working on a few more paintings for me, but this is an up-to-date comprehensive list so far."

"Just wait until you see the Gustav Klimt Apple Tree we're doing," Lily's eyes sparkled. "That one we'll get 34 million for."

"Provided Marlene and Remus don't fuck it up," Mary teased lightly.

"Oi," Remus called shaking his head. "We would never!"

Regulus cleared his throat to take control of the class again. "The largest art heist incurred a profit of 500 million dollars. Only thirteen paintings were stolen and it took 81 minutes to complete. We can do better," Regulus launched into his next lesson.

Most of it was about the logistics of the heist, which was fascinating to hear for James, but not necessarily pertinent to what he would be doing.

Remus and Marlene were rapidly copying down notes, as were Mary and Lily, who would be entering the museum to install the fake paintings right behind Remus and Marlene.

The rest of them were listening but felt less inclined to jot down every word straight from Regulus' mouth, which is why James was not surprised when a crumpled piece of paper landed on his desk from Peter's direction.

He unfolded it quietly.

I'm so bored. Please create a distraction so we can get out of class early.

James read it and scribbled down his own note, before tossing it back to Peter's desk.

Why can't you make a distraction?

Because Regulus won't get mad at you.

James read that note and smiled to himself.

Sorry, Peter. Don't want to risk it.

Ugh.

Sorry, but I'll make anything you want for dinner tonight to make up for it. Any requests?

Let me think about it.

Peter let out a sigh as James turned his attention back to Regulus for the remainder of class.

Peter requested vegetable pasta for dinner which was easy enough. James had all the ingredients, and it wouldn't take long to make.

He was standing over the sink when he heard footsteps behind him. He didn't have to turn around to know that it was Regulus coming in for his regularly scheduled cup of tea.

Ever since the orange muffin incident, Regulus would come into the kitchen sometimes to watch James cook dinner. It was always under the pretence that he was making tea, but he had a habit of lingering long after the kettle went cold.

James also hated when people watched him cook. He hardly ever liked complete solitude, but in the kitchen, he liked to move about freely, operating in the entire space. He found that other people watching him would ask to help, or offer their input, or get in the way, which James was always annoyed by, but not Regulus. Regulus would stand out of the way, he never made critiques on the way James was doing things, he would just sip his tea and sometimes he would make light conversation when James wasn't particularly busy with a certain task. He found he didn't mind Regulus being there at all.

So, James made an exception for him. It's not like it would have mattered if he didn't though. He could hardly tell Regulus to get out of his own kitchen whilst he was trying to cook, he

just added him to the list of people he could stand to be in the kitchen with. The only other person being his mum.

“The auction is next Saturday,” Regulus spoke quietly as James began chopping the vegetables. “I thought I would give you some more warning this time.”

James smiled, the sound of the knife hitting the cutting board making a steady continuous rhythm throughout the room.

“Do you have a suit with you?”

James let out a little laugh, “No, I didn’t bring a suit with me to an art heist believe it or not.”

“But you had that nice one you wore the day I interviewed you,” Regulus said, frowning slightly. “You didn’t bring that one with you?”

“It wasn’t on your list to bring,” James grinned teasingly.

Regulus let out a little sigh. No, no it wasn’t on his list. In all fairness, he did not foresee taking anyone to this auction except himself. He had a suit. He had several to choose from actually. “That’s fine I’ll just have to go out and get you one.”

James stopped cutting the vegetables, letting silence fill the room for a few seconds. “You’re going to buy me a suit?”

Regulus shrugged, “There’s a dress code. They won’t let you in if you don’t have one. You’ll just have to give me your measurements and I’ll take care of it this week.”

“Oh,” James blinked quickly, “okay.”

He wasn’t sure why this interaction was throwing him so much. Perhaps it was the simple domesticity of it all, both of them standing there in the kitchen, James making dinner, Regulus drinking tea and discussing doing James’ shopping. It was like he was looking right into a window of future possibility. It clouded his head, it made his heart flutter wildly in his chest.

“It’s really not a problem,” Regulus spoke again, misinterpreting the look on James’ face. “Unless you don’t want to go anymore, that’s fine too.”

“No, I want to go. I- thank you,” James said quickly. He seriously needed to pull himself together. He turned his attention back to cooking and Regulus watched, both in comfortable silence for a while until Regulus spoke again.

“You and Remus weren’t supposed to know each other you know,” Regulus furrowed his brows in thought.

“How did we get on this,” James mused, slightly distracted by his cooking.

“It’s just something I’ve been thinking about. I was talking to him in the library and he said you were best friends. No one was supposed to know each other. It makes things…more

complicated."

"Well, Remus and I aren't complicated. We haven't complicated anything with our friendship," James began, pulling out the plates and cups for dinner. "Besides I'm close with Marlene and Dorcas and well, everyone now. We're all friends anyway, so it all worked out in the end," James smiled looking over at Regulus, but the look on his face made him slightly uneasy.

"No you're probably right," Regulus let out a sigh at last. "I just-"

'-And we're just friends too. Like there's nothing else going on if you thought th-"

"-No James, I wasn't saying, I didn't think-"

"I mean I did kiss him once at a party a few years ago but we were both drunk and it was more friendly than anything. It was stupid, it didn't count-"

"Jesus, James, you have the wrong idea I wasn't-"

They were both talking over each other quickly.

"And we both hated it- like hated it. So never again-"

"James," Regulus held up his hand. "James."

James finally stopped talking and looked at Regulus, cheeks slightly pink from flusteredness.

"I didn't think anything was going on between you two. I didn't mean to make it sound like that," he said, staring down at the floor.

"Right," James nodded quickly. "And I didn't mean to make it sound like- well you know me, full transparency I suppose," he laughed slightly. "Sorry."

"Just forget I asked," Regulus murmured, shaking his head quickly. "I'll see you at dinner." And with that, Regulus walked out of the kitchen, empty teacup in hand and everything.

James sighed, shaking his head before returning back to finish cooking.

Chapter End Notes

will I ever get tired of writing softer moments between regulus and james? the answer is absolutely not.

also, in case I don't say it enough, i love you all <3 mwah

Chapter 13: Clandestine Meetings

Chapter Summary

Regulus knows a lot about suits
and art
and theft
not a lot about driving though or feelings

Chapter Notes

no jegulus next chapter so come get yalls soup now while it's hot
French translations in the end notes!

Tw: brief mention of homophobia

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“James you’re looking good,” Peter whistled as he passed by James’ open door.

James turned from the mirror where he was admiring himself to grin at Peter. “Thanks, mate.”

“It’s actually really working for you,” Peter added as James did a full spin so Peter could see the entire suit. Regulus knew a thing or two about suits, apparently.

“Okay good,” James bit his lip nervously. “I think Regulus is waiting downstairs so,” he let out a little sigh. “I should go right?”

Peter glanced at him confusedly. “Erm, yeah? Yes. It’s for work, he’ll be angry if you don’t go.”

“Right. Work,” James nodded.

“Well, work for him, but based on the way you’re practically vibrating, I’d say, you’re nervous for a different reason,” Peter tried to keep the smile off his face.

“Everyone knows huh,” James sighed dramatically.

“What, that you have a major, devastatingly big crush on Regulus? You’re not the best at hiding it in all fairness,” Peter raised his eyebrows.

James felt the blush creep up on his cheeks again.

“Didn’t he try to shoot you the first time you met?”

“Well, technically, that was Evan but it was under Regulus’ orders so I suppose it depends on how you look at it.”

Peter was still looking at him with a confused expression but it was now mixed slightly with concern, “...right. Well you look good. I’d say there’s no reason to be nervous, but it is Regulus so there probably is. But I wouldn’t be nervous about how you look though.”

James ran his fingers through his hair, letting Peter’s words calm him slightly. Normally, it would be Remus here comforting James, but Remus was in his own room getting ready for his own date. James had let him know when Regulus would be out and promised to text him as soon as they were heading back.

“It’s probably best to not keep him waiting,” Peter said gently, knocking on the door frame twice with his knuckles before walking out.

James gave himself another look over in the mirror before heading down to the kitchen where he knew Regulus would be waiting.

Now James had seen Regulus Black before. James had seen Regulus Black almost every day, several times a day, for many months now, but James had not ever seen Regulus Black in a suit. Suits were made so that Regulus Black could wear them.

Regulus’ eyes widened slightly as James walked in. “The suit looks good,” he said after a minute. “I’m glad it, um, fits.”

“What? Oh yes.” James held out his arms so Regulus could see. “It’s perfect.”

Regulus gave a curt nod before raising the car keys in his hand signalling for James to follow him out.

“Regulus,” James called, trailing behind him as they stepped outside.

“Yes?”

“You look nice.” It was easier to tell him when his back was turned. If Regulus was looking right at James, he would’ve lost his nerve. Nice didn’t even begin to cover how Regulus looked, but it would have to suffice for the present.

“Thank you,” he said quietly. “So do you.”

You always look nice James.

The first few minutes of the drive were spent in silence. Regulus didn't turn on the radio and James was desperately wracking his brain, trying to think of something interesting or witty to say.

"So it's a bit of a drive to get there," Regulus broke the silence first. "It's about a little more than an hour away. Which means you'll have to put up with my wonderful driving for the evening."

"Oh I don't mind, really," James smiled, tightening his seatbelt. "I can drive on the way back though. If you'd like."

"No," Regulus shook his head quickly. "No, I always drive. I haven't crashed yet, so we'll be fine. Besides, I'm far worse as a passenger than a driver, I promise."

"Alright," James ceded, still smiling.

"Well, I haven't crashed into another vehicle. Well, crash would be a bit of a strong word. I scraped the side of a building once. The building was fine but the paint on my car was messed up. Oh, and I've hit a few curbs but that's not a crash."

"You're joking," James audibly laughed now.

That was the entire reason Regulus had said anything in the first place; the reason he admitted his driving failures. He said it on the offhand chance that James would find it amusing, and that he would laugh, and fill the car with its bright, warm sound.

"I wish I was," Regulus shook his head ruefully.

"I can't ride a bicycle," James blurted.

"What?"

"You can't drive a car, I can't ride a bicycle."

"I can too drive a car! What do you call what I'm doing right now," Regulus scoffed.

"Okay and I can sort of ride a bicycle until it comes time for me to break, or turn, or balance, and then I wind up on the ground," James was grinning, feeling his nerves ease by the second.

Regulus rolled his eyes, but he was fighting a smile. "You're exaggerating."

"Maybe a little," James ceded with a playful smile.

"Tonight at this auction, we're looking to buy two paintings. One of them is Caillebotte. It's lot 47 and they estimate it'll go for 300,000. I'm prepared to go as high as 600,000 for it though. Bord de Mer, Normandie," Regulus explained, changing the subject. "That's what it's called."

The French rolled off Regulus' tongue with ease. James thought it was almost musical in its quality.

"The other one is a Renoir. Lavandières au bord du Loup, lot 62. They estimate 350,000 to 500,000 thousand. Ideally, we would spend no more than 450,000, but we'll see how it plays out."

"Both French," James mused.

"What can I say, I'm biassed," Regulus smiled softly.

"Tell me about them?"

"Hm," Regulus furrowed his brows. "You really want to know?"

"Of course I do," James answered quickly.

"Why?" The question was punched out of Regulus before he could think about it. "Sorry," he shook his head quickly. "It's just that no one's ever really," he frowned slightly trying to find the right words.

"Because you like to talk about it, and I like to listen," James answered quickly. "I like to watch your eyes light up and the way you get so excited that you talk with your hands, and how you try to stop yourself from smiling but you can't help it. It's nice," James answered with that unwavering honesty that seemed to come so naturally to him.

Regulus listened to his words carefully, hardly daring to breathe. James had paid attention, to *him* . It was the quiet, tender kind of attention that Regulus wasn't used to; he wasn't entirely sure what to do with it. It felt warm and bright and he let it settle in his chest and radiate through his bones.

"The Caillebotte," he began softly after a moment, "was painted on the Normandy coast; he liked to spend a lot of time there in the summer. It's this seaside landscape with trees and rolling hills. It's a pretty scene. It was a giant shift in his art practice, before this, he usually painted large figure paintings, and after, he started painting the sea and the land." He was aware of James watching him now, his eyes taking in every slight expression on his face. "And the Renoir is a painting done near the end of his life. It's a Mediterranean seascape with a group of figures doing their laundry by a river. It's beautiful, all the sweeping brushstrokes and the myriad of colours, when you see it tonight you'll know what I mean."

A car honked behind Regulus and James laughed again.

"Everyone is so bloody impatient," Regulus muttered, glaring in the mirror at the car behind him.

"Did you grow up in France," James asked, his ears still ringing with the pretty French words.

At this Regulus seemed to tense up slightly, his eyes darting over to James and observing him for a moment. Not for the first time, James had the feeling that Regulus was sizing him up,

determining if he was friend or foe.

“France and England, yes. Dual citizenship. A lot of my young years were spent in France and then we had to move to England,” Regulus said quickly, as if the speed of his words would take away the sting he felt when talking about anything related to his family. “Before my parents died they moved back to France, I was there a lot.”

James nodded encouragingly. This was the most Regulus had ever spoken about his family, excluding his brother that one time, which even then was incredibly vague. “Did you like living in France or England better?”

“France. It always felt more like home to me, I’m not sure why. Maybe because that’s where I was born, but,” Regulus let out a long sigh, “but my brother always liked England best. We could never agree on anything.”

Maybe James should stop while he was ahead. Maybe he should just be happy with the little bit of information that Regulus was willing to give, but he was insatiable. He wanted to know every little thing about him, and Regulus seemed willing enough to talk so James decided to ask another question. “What’s your family like?”

Regulus sucked in a sharp breath as if James had burned him with the question, “what is this, an interrogation?”

It was said lightly, but there was a slight edge to his voice.

“No, sorry. I didn’t mean for it to sound like that. I-”

“It’s fine James. I-,” Regulus paused briefly. “Evan and Barty are fine, thank you for inquiring about them.”

James couldn’t help the soft smile that overcame his features at that simple statement. “Evan and Barty?”

Regulus shrugged, “I’ve bailed both of those idiots out of jail more times than I can count, they’ve followed me everywhere, Germany, Amsterdam, you name it. I was there for Barty when his father basically threw him out, and Evan and Barty were there for me when…when I needed it. Yeah, I suppose that’s family.”

“I think so,” James said softly.

“But there’s no need to go around telling them that,” Regulus grumbled quickly, making another sharp turn.

“I’m sure they already know, and think the same thing.”

Regulus shrugged again and bit his tongue to keep from saying anything else. James was always so open and honest with everything. Anything you wanted to take, he was willing to give, freely and without reserve. It was intoxicating to be around. It made Regulus want to be the same.

He thought back to James' first telephone conversation with Evan. He had read the answers Evan recorded.

'Would you consider yourself a brave person James?'

'Absolutely.'

James was right. He certainly was brave, maybe even braver than Regulus was. To be able to speak and be yourself so freely, that was a bravery Regulus hadn't mastered yet. Sure, he was planning an art heist to tilt the world off its axis but what was that compared to James' raw honesty? He didn't know.

"So this is my first art auction, are there rules I'm supposed to know? I don't want to look uncultured," James changed the subject.

Regulus smiled, thankful for the out, and began talking about the structure of the auction and what to expect.

Eventually, they pulled up outside an auspicious-looking building as a few people were straggling in, wearing elaborate dresses and nice suits. They were covered in furs and sequins that glinted in the light.

"Do you need me to park?" James asked the question, raising his eyebrows while trying to hide a smirk.

"They have valet here," Regulus responded quickly, narrowing his eyes at the joke.

The sun was already setting and there was a hazy yellow glow emanating from the building.

"We've arrived about halfway through the auction. They've already done the lesser, lower selling works before this," Regulus began explaining, as men in white gloves held the doors open for them. "There's a little break while they prepare the second half of the lots, and then we'll take our seats, closer to the back or in the middle. We want to blend in."

James nodded, taking in the scene before him. There was a large lobby with swinging crystal chandeliers and marble floors. All around them, people in elegant attire flitted about the room, laughing and talking. There was an heir of importance that filled the space, James could feel it as soon as he stepped in. All around him, the noises of clinking glasses and soft chattering filled his ears.

"This is just the lobby, the actual auction will take place in the Woodard Room over there," Regulus pointed to a set of closed doors with 'Woodard Room' scrawled above them in gold script.

"Champagne," a waitress asked, holding a tray full of champagne flutes.

Regulus took two off the tray and handed one to James before the waitress bounded off.

“So the shot Marilyn is here,” James breathed out, still taking in all the glitz around him.

“It is,” Regulus took a drink. “Just behind those doors.”

“This is so exciting,” James smiled brightly. “I love it here.”

Regulus looked pleased at this, “you do?”

“Yeah,” James nodded enthusiastically. “Being here with you, it’s nice.”

At that Regulus let out a genuine smile before hiding it by taking another sip from his glass.

James and Regulus talked lightly to themselves over by the doors. They people-watched and James played his favourite game of whispering to Regulus insanely outrageous stories about the old women who passed by them or the men wearing monocles.

Some of the people Regulus actually knew by proxy. Marie Shelstrop, a Texas oil heiress. Anthony Creedence, hedge fund manager. Still, he would laugh at James’ wild stories about them and play along. Sometimes he would offer comments about how horribly they were dressed, or add real backstory that was just as scandalous as the fake one James had made up.

“Okay what about her in the violet dress,” Regulus whispered but then his eyes caught someone else in the crowd and went wide. “Merde,” he muttered under his breath.

James followed his gaze to see a tall man with stark blond hair walking over to them. His hair was so blond it was almost white, and he wore a sinister expression upon seeing Regulus, like a cat about to catch a mouse.

“Merde,” Regulus said again, downing his champagne flute and then reaching for James’ and finishing his. “Sorry,” he whispered quickly. “I’ll get you another one later.”

“Regulus,” the man smiled upon approaching. “What a surprise to see you here. Last I heard you were off the grid.”

The man's smile was fake and sickeningly twisted. It made James uneasy.

“Lucius,” Regulus said coldly, all trace of the smiling, laughing person from before gone. “How’s Narcissa?”

“She’s fine,” he dismissed quickly. “We’re trying for a son you know. What brings you to America? Trying for the Warhol I suppose?”

“Something like that,” Regulus gritted out.

“Well since you’re in the area, I have a job for you if you-”

“I don’t do that anymore Lucius,” Regulus cut him off shortly.

“Not freelancing your talents anymore? That’s a real shame,” Lucius raised his eyebrows in mock surprise.

“That part of the Black family business died with my father.”

James could tell that Regulus was uncomfortable. He wanted to reach out, to put a hand on his shoulder, to let him know that he was there, but he thought better of it. Whoever this Regulus was, he was a force to witness. He was hardened and calloused and cold as ice, but James knew it was because he didn’t want Lucius to know what he was thinking. He was shutting himself in and freezing everyone else out.

“Speaking of your father,” Lucius' eyes darted over to James. “Qui est cette personne? Ton petit ami? Que dirait ton père?”

“Non,” Regulus took a small step away from James. “But if he was I wouldn’t tell you.” His tone was sharp, James was sure he would be sliced to pieces if it had been directed at him, but Lucius appeared completely unaffected.

He wasn’t entirely sure what was being said, but he definitely knew it was about him.

“Things never change do they,” Lucius took a deep breath in, he appeared as if speaking to Regulus had given him a massive headache. “What are you here for then, really?”

“If I tell you, you’ll just put in bids to drive the price up,” Regulus said through a clenched jaw.

“Well, I’m sure you can afford it.”

Regulus didn’t respond.

“Look,” Lucius said more lowly, leaning in close, “I think it would be in your best interest to hear about this job. Mulciber is-”

“No,” Regulus said sharply, holding his hand up. “You listen, in a few months, I’ll be making some new acquisitions. Highly valuable acquisitions, so you tell Mulciber and Lestrange and whoever else you want to, to keep their fucking schedules open.”

At this, Lucius' eyes glinted, “ah, so you are still in the family business after all? Save me a European master, I always like those best.” Lucius backed away slightly. “And I’ll tell Mulciber and Lestrange. Who knows? This might even get you back in their good graces.”

“Tell them to bring all their fucking cash,” Regulus spat coldly.

“I suppose I’ll be going now,” Lucius said equally coldly. “It’s a shame we didn’t have the chance to talk,” he turned that sinister smile to James. “I like someone who knows how to keep their mouth shut. And Regulus always did like them pretty.”

“Don’t you fucking talk to him,” Regulus said lowly, grabbing James’ arm and moving to stand slightly in front of him, as if he could shield James from Lucius’ words, or from Lucius in general.

Lucius smirked, “Things never change. I’ll send Narcissa your regards,” he called before turning away and disappearing into the crowd.

“Fucker,” Regulus muttered once Lucius was gone.

“You know him,” James spoke finally, mind reeling from the interaction.

“Ouais,” Regulus nodded. “Bastard married my favourite cousin. I’m sorry about that. He normally goes to these things, I wasn’t thinking.”

“No, you don’t have to apologise,” James said quickly, but he still furrowed his brow.

“If I promise to explain later, will that be enough to forget about it for now?” Regulus turned to him with pleading eyes. “Can we just hold off until the drive home?”

James nodded quickly. “Sure.”

Regulus still seemed tense from the interaction, “Thank you. I’ll get you more champagne, sorry,” he muttered, taking the empty glasses from James’ hand and going to find a waiter.

Once the doors to the Woodard Room had opened again, James had managed to calm Regulus down slightly. Well, James and the champagne. They all filed in from the lobby to the auction room, abandoning their champagne flutes for numbered auction paddles.

Each bidder had a paddle associated with the name that they registered under. Regulus’ paddle was number five.

James frowned slightly as they took their seats in the middle of the room. “Where’s my paddle?”

“You don’t have one,” Regulus turned to him.

“But why not?”

“Because we’re bidding together, technically, I’m the only one bidding.”

“But what if I wanted to wave the paddle? What if I want to participate?”

Regulus rolled his eyes but bit his bottom lip to keep from smiling.

“You can’t just invite someone to an auction and then not let them wave the paddle.”

Silently, Regulus slipped the paddle into James’ hand.

James looked down at it and turned it over, and Regulus tried not to audibly laugh as he watched James practice holding it up and swinging it back down.

“Okay actually, now I’m nervous. This is a lot of pressure to wield the paddle. What if I mess up and bid a hundred million dollars on a shit painting or something?”

“You better fucking not,” Regulus laughed. “We just talked about what paintings we needed and how much we were spending in the car.”

“No, I didn’t know what I was asking for when I asked for it,” James began spinning the paddle in his hand back and forth.

“It’s fine, we’ll work out a system, okay? You hold the paddle and when I need you to bid, I’ll tap your leg. Raise the paddle when you feel me tap your leg. The auctioneer will point to you, it moves pretty fast but you’ll get the timing when we start. You get to hold the paddle, I ensure there are no mistakes, it’s a win-win.”

James nodded appeased. He looked up to the front of the room where a man in a nice suit made his way up to the centre podium. He was followed by a panel of other people who sat down at the desks behind him.

“Good evening ladies and gentlemen, we are about to begin with the second portion of tonight's sale,” the man at the front began.

James watched as the two large screens turned on behind the man. They began displaying currency conversions from all around the world. US and Hong Kong Dollars, Euros, Pounds, Yen, and Rubles.

“We’re going to start with lot number 45,” the wall next to the man began to rotate and a painting mounted to the wall came into view. “This is a Maton, a talented artist from Stockholm, let’s start the bidding here at twenty thousand.”

James watched with rapt attention as the entire auction hall went deadly quiet. The only noise in the room was the auctioneer as everyone appeared on the edge of their seats. There was an electrifying feeling in the air, James could practically hear it sizzle.

The man spoke in a calm but quick cadence, “Thirty thousand. Forty thousand. Forty-five thousand. Thank you, sir. Fifty thousand. Just look at this wonderful piece. Now imagine it hanging in your home. Fifty thousand to the lady in the back.”

It was over just as quickly as it had started and soon, the wall rotated and another painting was out on display. “Lot 46.”

James watched as people lifted up their paddles, made sly glances at each other across the room, and shifted in their seats. Some cursed under their breaths when they were outbid, and some walked out of the room entirely.

A soft touch on James’ leg made him jump slightly.

“This is the one,” Regulus whispered. “The Caillebotte, you ready?”

James nodded.

“Lot 47, we’ll start the bidding at two hundred thousand.”

James raised his paddle and the man nodded.

“Two twenty-five?”

“I didn’t tap your leg,” Regulus hissed quietly.

“Sorry,” James chirped softly. “I got nervous.”

“Three fifty. Three hundred and fifty thousand.”

A light tap from Regulus, and James raised the paddle. He’d be lying if he said he didn’t feel a rush, from the auction and from being so close to Regulus.

“Three-fifty from that gentleman right there,” the auctioneer nodded to James.

Before he knew what was happening, the bang of the gavel echoed throughout the room. “Sold to that gentleman in the glasses for three hundred and fifty thousand dollars. Lot 48,” the wall rotated again.

James waited for Regulus to move his hand from his leg, but it stayed firmly planted on his thigh. He must have forgotten that it was there. James tried desperately to sit as still as possible so that he wouldn’t alert Regulus to the fact that his hand was still sitting there. It was a light touch, a delicate one, but James felt the weight of it nonetheless.

Regulus’ hand didn’t move again until the Renoir came out. It was the 67th lot of the evening. Slowly and methodically, and without ever breaking eye contact with the front of the room, Regulus began his intermittent tapping again on James’ leg.

James followed each tap with a raise of the paddle, smiling each time.

“Another lot sold to the young man in the glasses,” the gavel banged down on the podium again. The sound was a punishment for the woman in pink across the aisle who was also particularly interested in the Renoir. James grinned, knowing he had won.

This time, Regulus made to pull his hand away from James’ leg and impulsively, James reached out with the hand that wasn’t holding the paddle and guided it back down. Regulus’ hand rested closer to his knee and in the most unsubtle move ever, James inched his hand upward so it rested on the middle of his thigh where it was before.

“Watch it, Potter,” Regulus muttered lowly, but he made no motion to move his hand.

They watched the rest of the auction in silent content, observing and admiring each painting as it was presented. Sometimes Regulus would lean in to explain something to James or to point out a detail that he particularly liked.

Eventually, the final lot of the evening was announced. The auctioneer gestured dramatically to the shot painting of Marilyn Monroe and Regulus sat forward in his seat, his eyes going wide. They scanned every inch of the canvas hungrily, taking in every little detail. He didn’t notice his grip tighten on James’ leg in excitement.

James too looked at it in awe. He thought about what Regulus had said before, how this painting had witnessed something, witnessed a shooting and managed to get out of it

completely unscathed. He liked that Regulus talked about paintings containing memories as people did. It meant that certain things would stay long after they were all gone. The paintings would hold the memories for them.

“The bidding starts at ten million dollars,” The auctioneer called out and James watched the price conversion screen change accordingly to match the number the auctioneer had called.

As slyly as he could Regulus began looking around the room, waiting to see the paddles raised and who was bidding. He could make out Lucius’ stark hair from the front of the room, raising his paddle in the chaos. The auctioneer was rattling off numbers more quickly than he had the entire night.

“One hundred million. Do I hear a hundred and ten?”

A man in a grey suit, Lucius, a woman in red, two inauspicious people in the front. All betting against one another rapidly.

“One seventy. One eighty. One ninety. Two hundred million.”

Some people gasped at the price whilst others murmured to the people sitting around them.

“Two hundred and fifty million. Two hundred and fifty million,” the auctioneer was slowing down now. “Can I get two fifty-five?”

The auctioneer gestured to Lucius who shook his head with an irritated grimace.

“Sold! To the man in grey for two hundred and fifty million dollars,” the gavel banged.

At this, some people laughed, others clapped, but Regulus let a cloud of annoyance pass over his face.

“Is everything alright,” James asked quietly.

“That man works for Mulciber,” Regulus responded as if that would clear anything up. “Mulciber doesn’t deserve the shot Marilyn. He’ll fucking ruin it.”

“Right, of course not. Bastard,” James shook his head vehemently in agreement. “Who’s Mulciber?”

Regulus waved his hand dismissively. “No one I can’t deal with when the time is right. Come on, we should go before Lucius tries to talk to us again.”

“Don’t we need to get the paintings?” James asked, turning back to the podium. People were already streaming out of the room in droves.

“No, they’re shipping it to us. I sent the works to a warehouse close to here. I’ll pick them up sometime next week,” Regulus explained, standing up and heading outside.

Soon they had left the gold and glitz of the auction house and made their way back. The sun had set long ago, and the moon was almost full, bathing everything in its soft light. James

sent a quick text to Remus letting him know they were on their way back.

The first half of the ride was spent talking about the people at the auction, Regulus going out of his way to carefully avoid the subject of Lucius entirely.

“I’m glad we won,” James grinned as Regulus drove down the deserted roads.

“What are you talking about,” Regulus hummed absentmindedly.

“The auction. We won the auction. We came there to get two paintings and we got them both. What a team we are.”

Regulus gave him a soft look out of the corner of his eyes, “I suppose so, though the notion of winning an auction is questionable in and of itself. If anyone won, it was the auction house.”

“Yes the auction house won and we won because we got what we came here for and me, I won too because I got to spend time with you.”

“James.”

“What?”

“Are you flirting with me?”

“I am yes, but I must be pretty shit at it if it’s taken you this long to notice.”

At this Regulus laughed. Audibly laughed. He tilted his head back and his curls fell from his face and his eyes crinkled shut and he laughed.

“Oh come on,” James said after a minute, grinning.

“I’m not laughing at you I swear,” Regulus smiled, once he had stopped laughing. “You’re not shit at it. Flirting I mean. You're not subtle, but you're not shit.”

“Oh good, because my ego would’ve been seriously hurt, you know.”

“Hm. I’m sure.”

They drove in happy silence for a while more and then Regulus turned more solemn.

“About Lucius tonight you should know,” he began frowning slightly. “I used to do a lot of work with his family, well my father did, and then I did after he got sick. I worked on commission for him. He would ask for a certain artist or time period, genre even and I would procure a work for him. Sometimes it would be jewellery too, but mainly it was art. There were a few families my father worked closely with. The Mulcibers, the Malfoys, the Selwyns, the Lestranges. None of them are upstanding citizens, they’re actually very dangerous men.

James nodded along silently.

“When my father died, I stopped working for all of them. They put me in too much danger, too many risky situations. Barty was actually shot once by one of their men, I think they were aiming for me. They claimed it was an accident but I never believed that for a second,” Regulus gripped the steering wheel tighter. “I had enough money from my parents after they died to quit working for any of them, which made them all mad, but I didn’t care. Two of my cousins married into those families, Narcissa is a Malfoy now and my eldest cousin, Bellatrix, is a Lestrange, so they couldn’t touch me.”

“They’d force you to keep stealing for them?” James asked. “Why couldn’t they find anyone else?”

“There’s no one better at this than me. Other people are sloppy, greedy, and get caught. I don’t get caught. They know me, they knew my father, they know how we operate so they like to keep me close.”

“And these are the people we’re going to sell to? After the heist?”

Regulus nodded curtly. “They are the market for stolen art. It’s them or no one.”

“You don’t like Lucius,” James prompted when it seemed as if Regulus was through speaking.

He let out a wry laugh, “You noticed that, did you? No, I don’t. He married my favourite cousin and took her away from me. He’s an arrogant, self-conceited, low-rate slimeball. When I was younger he caught me sneaking a boy out of my father’s house.” Regulus seemed incredibly tense, and his jaw tightened.

“He blackmailed me for months. Threatened to tell my father about it if I didn’t cater to his every need. He said something to that boy too, I know he did, because I never saw him again.” Regulus sighed as he pulled up to the house. They were home already.

“Your parents, they were homophobic,” James asked gently.

Regulus let out another laugh, one devoid of any humour, “that, among other things.”

This was normally the part of the conversation that Regulus hated. The part where people would look at him with round eyes full of sympathy and tell him how sorry they were. How awful it must have been, how they couldn’t imagine something like that. He took the keys out of the ignition and braced himself for the impact of James’ inevitable pity, for the part of the conversation he always hated.

“Well fuck them,” James blurted and Regulus looked at him with surprise.

Regulus couldn’t help the laugh that bubbled out of him. It wasn’t what he was expecting to hear at all, and yet it was exactly what he needed to hear. But then it struck him. It reminded him of Sirius. This is exactly something Sirius would say.

And for the first time in Regulus’ life, he whispered, “yeah. Fuck them.”

Regulus made a move to go in, but then stopped himself and turned to look back at James who was still sitting in the passenger's seat. “I know… that things aren’t…they aren’t easy with me. That it’s… hard to get to know me, I know- I know that I don’t make it easy,” Regulus was struggling. “And I want to tell you everything you want to know, I do, but I-I can’t-”

“Regulus, hey,” James reached out and touched Regulus’ arm softly, interrupting him. “That’s okay. You don’t ever have to tell me anything you don’t want to. Ever. And you’re not difficult. Being with you is one of the easiest things I’ve ever done. Whether we’re speaking or just sitting in silence.”

The way James was looking at Regulus was so sincere and so earnest, Regulus had to gasp for air.

“I wish I could give you more,” he said so quietly that James almost didn’t hear him.

“This is enough.”

“But still.”

“Okay then, just tell me something else you like,” James smiled softly after thinking for a moment.

“What?”

“You said that it’s hard to get to know you but I know that you like orange muffins and the colour green. You like snakes and summertime, and Tchaikovsky and firing cannons during symphonies. You like Andy Warhol and you were born in France, and you like silver jewellery and you like playing the piano and-”

“-And I like your laugh,” Regulus interrupted and James snapped his mouth closed. “It’s the happiest sound I’ve ever heard.” Regulus thought he would try some of James Potter's’ bravery for tonight. Just once, just to see how it felt. Just to give him something-something more.

And *oh* , James didn’t know what to do with that. He had no idea what to do with that.

“Sometimes, I think about things I could say that would make you laugh because when you do, you just make everything so,” Regulus paused for a moment. “So bright.”

James closed his eyes at the impact of his words, letting them wash over him and echo in his head. “Regulus you can’t say stuff like that to me,” James croaked.

“Why,” Regulus asked softly, staring at James. He was trying to memorise the way he looked in this moment, the way Regulus’ words had softened his features and filled his eyes with a quiet desperation.

“You know why,” James breathed out at last.

Time stood incredibly still, neither of them wanted to move or break eye contact.

“I do want to kiss you, James,” Regulus said finally. “I did then, and I do now.”

They were close, so close, all James would have to do is lean in a little further. But Regulus would have to be the one to initiate it. It was his rule that they would be breaking, he would have to be the one to do it.

“Then kiss me.”

James’ eyes were searching Regulus’, pleading, begging him. He sat in anticipation, waiting for Regulus to lean in slightly, just a little, but instead, Regulus closed his eyes tightly and let out a short sigh.

“I can’t.”

“Wh-”

“You know why.”

They sat in the car for a long time, neither of them making a move to go back into the house. The moon cast a light glow in the car and Regulus placed both hands on the steering wheel before resting his forehead against it.

He let out a long sigh, “what are we doing here, James?”

“I don’t know,” James answered with that unshakable honesty. “I don’t know, but I’m glad we’re here together.”

Chapter End Notes

is this my favourite chapter so far? dare I speak? maybe perhaps it is.

Translations:

Merde= shit
Qui est cette personne? Ton petit ami? Que dirait ton père? = Who is this person? Your boyfriend? What would your father say?
Ouais= yeah

Chapter 14: Clandestine Meetings pt. 2

Chapter Summary

Wolfstar baybee!

Chapter Notes

This is actually going to be a double update situation so bear with me because you are also getting chapter 15 later.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

'We've just left!'

That text from James was enough to spring Remus into action. He ran his fingers quickly through his hair to get it just right before heading to Peter's room.

"It's time," Remus grinned nervously.

"You and James are both ridiculous, you know that," Peter sighed already getting up. "If Regulus finds out," he looked warningly over at Remus as he walked out of his room and down the stairs.

"He won't find out. And even if he does, I reckon he'll kill me before he has the chance to ask if anyone else was involved, so you'll be safe."

"Right," Peter grumbled rooting around a drawer on the first floor. "But Regulus knows I'm the only one who knows about where he keeps the spare set of keys. So I'll most definitely be killed as well."

"I won't get caught," Remus replied firmly.

Peter gave him a dubious look and held out the car keys to him, "just keep me out of it, whatever you do."

Remus nodded, flashing him a wide grin, "anything you want Peter." And then he was gone, bounding down the hallway and out the door.

Remus quietly slipped into the car and sent a text to Sirius letting him know he was on his way. He had long ago memorised Sirius' number, no longer needing to bother James by getting the slip of paper underneath his mattress. Sirius had sent him detailed instructions on how to get to his hotel from the museum, but Remus was still nervous he wouldn't be able to find it. The worst thing about Regulus' flip phone rule meant no GPS.

He took a deep breath before starting the engine and pulling out on the dirt road. The house was big, and the cars were normally parked in the back, so it was highly unlikely that anyone would notice the other car was gone, but they might be able to hear him drive away. Peter offered to keep a lookout and provide a distraction for the first ten minutes.

Remus smiled to himself. As much as Peter wanted to be left out of what James had coined 'The Great Date-scapade', he was still always willing to lend a hand. He made a mental note to shower Peter with riches after the heist to thank him, not that he would need it.

He felt the giddy excitement of a teenager and laughed as he drove through the town down the winding roads. He was the teenager sneaking out of the house to meet a boy and Regulus was the overbearing parent. He shook his head at the mixture of nerves and excitement building up in him, it was comical.

Soon enough he found himself in the lobby of Sirius' hotel room, waiting for him to come down the lift. He was rocking nervously back and forth on the balls and heels of his feet while people streamed all around him, eager to get on with their daily tasks.

"Moony, you look absolutely dashing," Sirius grinned, looking smitten.

"So do you," Remus replied, looking Sirius up and down.

Sirius leaned in to kiss him. Both of them couldn't get enough of each other. It didn't matter how many times Sirius would drop by while Remus was at work, or how many times they went out when Remus requested off work early, or how many times they spoke on the phone, they were both uncontrollable around one another and ravenous for one another's time and attention.

"What do you say we go upstairs instead," Sirius mumbled against Remus' lips, no embarrassment for public displays of affection at all.

"I made reservations," Remus sighed. "Later perhaps."

Sirius grinned, pulling away, "wining and dining me tonight are we, Remus?"

"That's the plan, come on," he smiled, as he slung an arm over Sirius' shoulders and led him out through the lobby and to the car.

The entire car ride to the restaurant, Sirius entertained Remus with wild stories of concerts he's attended recently, making sure to supply heavy-handed criticism and commentary. He also went into a long story about how he got absolutely toasted at his friend Frank's wedding and made a fool of himself giving the best man speech.

Remus would laugh and provide commentary when necessary but was generally content to let Sirius lead the conversation. To let Sirius fill the air with his laughs and cries and outbursts. Remus loved spending time with him, he had never met anyone before that just fit together with him so well. He'd never met someone who made his heart flutter just by looking at him and who made him blush like mad with just a simple wink or smile. When Remus was with Sirius, he was all he could think about, and when he was away, all Remus could think about was when he would get to see him again.

"This place looks quite nice," Sirius said as they pulled up. "You took me to a nice restaurant."

"Only the best for you," Remus said, parking. "And it's really expensive which is why we're also splitting the bill," he teased.

Sirius grinned and let out a small laugh.

When they walked in, everything was lit in a low glow, with soft fairy lights twinkling throughout the entire place. They followed the hostess to their table and sat down, looking at the wine menu. Well, Sirius was looking at the wine menu and Remus was looking at Sirius.

"I feel very special right now Moony," Sirius smiled once their food had been brought out. "How many others have you taken here though? Does this move always work?"

Remus let out a little laugh. He actually had no idea where to take Sirius for a nice dinner around here, and he had to ask one of the other girls he worked with for a list of nice places in the area a few days before. "Believe me when I say, you are the only person I've ever brought here."

Sirius looked pleased at this.

They fell into a light and entertaining conversation that was always easy to have when they were together and when dessert came they both shared a tiramisu and chocolate ice cream.

"So," Sirius began, drawing the spoon out his mouth with a pop.

Remus gave him a soft smile, "So?"

"So I hate to be this person because I'm pretty sure we are but we haven't really made anything official which is fine because there's no pressure to but I just had to know because I've been up at night thinking about it and," Sirius took a deep breath to fuel the rest of his run on sentence, "are you my boyfriend?"

Sirius was looking at him with slightly flushed cheeks and wide eyes.

"Do you want me to be your boyfriend," Remus asked, gripping the edge of the table slightly and trying very hard not to beam across the table at Sirius.

"Yes," the word punched out of Sirius before he could think about it.

Remus nodded, "well that's good because I'd love to be your boyfriend. Officially that is."

“Okay,” Sirius smiled gently, “cool.”

“That’s it,” Remus laughed. “No patent Sirius remark? Just ‘cool’?”

“Cool as in, I’m going to take you back to my hotel room and fu-”

“-Okay,” Remus cut him off quickly, blushing profusely and looking around. “That’s more like it.”

Sirius smirked in response. “Let’s get out of here then, yeah?”

Remus nodded, paying the bill before they made their way out, hand in hand.

Once they were in the car Sirius reached for the radio and turned it down.

“Look,” now Sirius’ voice sounded more strained. “If we’re dating now, there are things you should know- things we have to figure out. Because I don’t want this to be some two-month fling, maybe it’s early to say that but I don’t care. I am crazy about you, that’s not a secret.”

This moment was supposed to be sweet. Sirius’ words were supposed to make Remus’ heart flutter and his cheeks blush, but instead, he felt the cold slimy stone of guilt begin to form in his stomach. He could feel Sirius staring at him intently, and he wanted to shrink under his gaze.

Up until this point, it had been relatively easy with Sirius, because they were both hiding things from one another and they both knew it. Sirius was never willing to deep dive into things that appeared to make Remus uncomfortable because he wasn’t ready to talk about all of his shit. Remus could sense that, and it made it very easy to obfuscate certain aspects of both their lives.

“I don’t want this to be a two-month whirlwind romance either,” Remus spoke at last, treading carefully. His heart was beginning to beat wildly with nerves. If Sirius started being completely open, then he would expect the same from Remus and the heist hadn’t happened yet, he wasn’t ready.

Sirius let out a sigh of relief, “oh, thank God.”

“But Sirius I-”

“I’ve actually been thinking about it, not in a weird way but just in a ‘what if’ way,” Sirius cut in again. “And I think I could apply to transfer my…international consultant job, here.”

Remus’ mouth went dry and he nearly swerved off the road out of pure shock, “what?”

“It’s just that your whole life is here-”

“And your whole life is in England,” Remus interjected quickly. “You’re always telling me how much you miss it.”

“I know, but I-”

“My schedule will clear up in a few months anyway, so we can wait until then to do anything solid. I would hate for you to stay here for me when we could both go to England.”

“But what about your PhD,” Sirius asked, his brows furrowed.

“They have schools in England,” Remus smiled tightly.

“You'd move for me?”

“You just said you’re thinking about staying here for me,” Remus countered. The cold stone of guilt started doing flips in his stomach.

Sirius seemed to sit with this for a minute before he spoke again. “Something you should know about my job is that I-”

“Sirius,” Remus cut in, his voice a little strained. “We don’t have to think about all of this right now. Let’s just be happy for tonight and we can think about all of the logistics later. Unless you’re leaving soon,” Remus asked, an edge of panic to his voice.

“No,” Sirius said quickly. “No, I’m not leaving soon.”

They were both quiet for a moment.

“I suppose you’re right. We don’t have to think everything through right now. I just get excited, that’s all,” Sirius smiled softly. “Sorry.”

Remus dropped his shoulders slightly and calmed down, but the guilt was still there. What the fuck was he thinking? He wasn’t thinking, actually. At all. He needed to talk to James and lay it all out, and hear what he had to say. Though James would probably tell him to do something incredibly stupid like tell Sirius the truth, or at least as much of the truth as possible, because James wasn’t afraid of Regulus for some reason. Better yet, James would probably tell him to tell Regulus.

“I’m sorry,” Sirius said again quietly from the passenger seat. “I really didn’t mean to freak you out.”

“No,” Remus said quickly, snapping out of his thoughts. “You didn’t, please, don’t apologise.” The guilt was multiplying at far too quick a rate for Remus to be able to breathe normally.

“Are you- do you still want to come up,” Sirius asked when they had parked outside the hotel. It came out a little smaller than before, and a little quieter. Sirius who was always so loud and confident and bold was treading as lightly as possible. It was a question with many layers. He wanted to know that he hadn’t scared Remus away, that he hadn’t come off too strong and ruined the best thing that could possibly happen to him before it had even really started.

And Remus, feeling incredibly guilty for shutting Sirius down the way that he had and wanting to make it up to him, to assure him that everything was fine, agreed, trying to shake the guilt that had taken permanent residence in his stomach.

And that's how he found himself tangled up in the starchy hotel bed sheets with Sirius clinging to him. He was running his fingers over each of Remus' tattoos on his chest.

"You have a moon tattoo," he whispered, tracing over it delicately.

"Yeah, I have a bit of a thing about the moon," Remus responded hazily, drunk off Sirius' closeness.

Sirius laughed quietly, "yeah, I gathered that, *Moony* ." Sirius ran his hands down further to trace the wolf paw print on Remus' hip and he let out a gasp as Sirius chuckled. "All your tattoos are hidden," Sirius sighed, still running his hands over all of them. There were only a few, smattered all over Remus' body, most of them done when he was younger.

"Yeah, they're easy to hide that way," Remus explained, still holding Sirius tightly. "For work and things, you know."

"Hmm," Sirius hummed, planting a sloppy kiss on Remus' shoulder. "Do you want any more?"

"Sure," Remus sighed, trying not to close his eyes and fall asleep in his comfortable blissed-out state. "What about you?" Remus asked, tracing Sirius' tattoos with his fingers. "Tell me about these," He murmured into Sirius' hair quietly.

"I have a tattoo of a motorbike, it's my dream motorbike," he began and Remus traced where it was located just under his ribs. "I'm manifesting acquiring it," he said sleepily.

Remus listened to Sirius while he continued to trace the designs on his skin and eventually, Sirius nodded off, falling asleep in Remus' arms. Remus lay there in the quiet, wondering how something could feel so fucking good and right and *ache* at the same time.

You deserve to be happy Remus. You deserve to be that happy, all of the time.

James' words echoed in his head. Sirius made him happy, indescribably so, but the guilt he felt for not being honest, when he knew Sirius was ready, was already eating him up. He just needed to get through the heist, and then he would start telling Sirius everything, slowly but surely. It would work out, they would work out.

Remus' phone buzzed from the table next to the bed and he grabbed it, trying not to wake Sirius.

'Heading back now! Be there in an hour!'

Remus sighed before completely untangling himself from Sirius. He moved about the room, putting all of his clothes back on one at a time.

Sirius stirred slightly from the bed, “where are you going,” he mumbled, his eyes still closed. “You can stay.”

“I know,” Remus whispered softly, leaning down to kiss him. “I just can’t tonight. Another time.”

Sirius was too tired at this point to put up much of a fight. “Fine,” he groaned as Remus finished getting dressed.

Remus planted a final kiss on his forehead before heading out the door, “bye boyfriend.”

Sirius let out a hum of delight, “bye, Moony.”

Remus drove home in silence letting the waves of emotion wash over him one at a time. Sheer joy at spending time with Sirius tonight, absolute giddiness at being a boyfriend, *his* boyfriend, to despair. Because what kind of boyfriend lies like he does? Not a good one. Everything was making him feel nauseous. Sirius was dating a lie. Sirius wanted to relocate to America for a liar and a soon-to-be criminal.

Not an entire lie , Remus tried to persuade himself. Most things he said were true. The most important things he said anyway. The things that mattered were true.

He pulled up to the house and locked the car quietly. He slipped in through the backdoor that Peter had left unlocked for him and placed the keys back in the drawer. No one was downstairs to see him, if they had been, they’d probably say he didn’t look like someone who just had the best night.

Now that he was further away from Sirius there was no buffer for his guilt. It was all that he was left with. He made his way upstairs to his room and lay down in his bed, thinking of how empty and cold it suddenly felt without Sirius.

This was supposed to be a good night, this was supposed to be a great night, one of the best ones of Remus’ life, but he had tainted it. He had ruined it by tricking Sirius into thinking he was someone he wasn’t, and God fucking damn it, he realised now why Regulus had all his stupid fucking rules. Because this was complicated, he had complicated things by breaking the rules and now he was paying the price.

He rolled over in his bed, trying to sleep, but he felt too sick to do so. A little over an hour later, he heard James thunder up the stairs, sighing to himself and muttering something about Regulus.

Chapter End Notes

Remus: We're dating! :)
Remus: We're dating!? :o

Chapter 15: Portrait Lessons

Chapter Summary

Back to your regularly scheduled Jegulus programming aka James plans a date

Chapter Notes

Double Update! (why you ask? bc I've had this chapter basically written since the beginning of this fic and also u didn't hear this from me but chapter 14 is not my fav and i'm giving y'all this to make up for it)

Tw: slight sexual content it’s not super graphic… I’d say like YA level

See the end of the chapter for more notes

James knocked quietly on Regulus’ door. It was pitch black, and the dead of night, and he had to use the tiny square of light from his flip phone screen to safely navigate himself down the stairs and through the long hallways.

Ever since the night of the auction, he was on another mission. He couldn’t stop replaying that night over and over again in his mind. He knew that Regulus wanted him, maybe as much as he wanted Regulus; he’d practically said so. Now, James just had to get him to act on his feelings, which was proving to be incredibly difficult.

James tried everything. He smirked at Regulus in class when he was teaching, he would flirt shamelessly when Regulus would come in to watch him cook, he would leave the first few buttons of his shirt undone. He would look for little excuses to touch him; when passing him something over breakfast he would let their fingers brush up against each other slightly, to get his attention he would lightly place his fingers on his hand, or brush past him in the hallway.

If he was lucky, Regulus would still slightly, maybe his eyes would go wide, or he would smile. If they were alone in the kitchen he might even laugh, or shake his head, but that was it. It was driving James crazy. He needed to do something, so he set out to up the stakes of his mission.

“James,” Regulus opened the door in a swinging motion, he was still fully dressed.

“You didn’t even look to see if it was me. How did you know,” James grinned leaning up against the doorframe.

“Because you are the only one in this house who would attempt to knock on this door at this time of night,” Regulus said flatly, raising his eyebrows.

James peered over his shoulder and saw a book downturned on his bed. “Do you ever sleep?”

Regulus followed his gaze and looked over his shoulder at the book, before smiling slightly, “only when I have to. Why are you here?”

“You know I was thinking,” James sighed, crossing his arms and resting his head on the doorframe, letting it support him. “It’s incredibly unfair the way we have this setup here.”

“This isn’t a conversation we can have at another time,” Regulus asked, looking less than amused.

James went on, undeterred, “because I don’t have access to a car. So I can’t pull up to your house and take you out on a date and surprise you by taking you to a secret place I picked out. Because I’d have to ask you for the keys, and you’re really annoying because you like to know everything, so I’d ruin the surprise before you even got to experience it.”

“James what are you-”

“So I’m settling for the next best thing. I’m asking you on a date right now. I’m surprising you with a date, right now. Surprise,” James grinned, taking in the confused expression on Regulus’ face.

“What do you mean,” Regulus asked slowly, trying to calm the rush of excitement he felt at James’ words.

“I mean, Regulus Black, I’m taking you on a date. But since I don’t have a car we’re going to have to make the long journey up to the third floor of this house.”

“It’s almost four in the morning.”

“Perfect time for a surprise date then.”

“A date?”

“Jesus, Regulus,” James chuckled, “can you just come with me? Or are you turning me down?”

Regulus eyed him carefully, pursing his lips slightly.

“There was nothing in your rules about a date. You said no sex, and no relationships, tell me how this violates either of those rules,” James goaded.

“Alright,” Regulus said at last, closing his bedroom door softly behind him. James had something planned; Regulus owed it to him to at least see what it was.

He let James guide him through the hallways and up the stairs, though he knew the house and all its curves so well he would’ve been able to make his way up to the third floor with his

eyes closed.

“Alright,” James whispered as he stopped outside one of the doors on the third floor. His hand resting on the doorknob. “Surprise,” he grinned again, opening the door in a wide flush.

Whatever Regulus had expected was certainly not what had awaited him. There were candles lit everywhere, bathing everything in a soft golden glow. In the centre of the room sat two easels across from one another with blank canvases and a various assortment of paints and brushes.

“I’m not an artist by any means, but I had Lily and Mary help me set everything up in here. Don’t worry, I didn’t tell them what it was for, they just think I’m really enthusiastic about painting all of a sudden. Also, I found the candles under the sink in the kitchen and I thought it would be fun,” James began, trying to quell his nerves and gauge Regulus’ reaction.

“We’re going to paint?”

“Yeah, you’re my muse,” James smirked. “That’s what they call it isn’t it?”

Regulus smiled, his eyes still taking in the room, “Yes. It is.”

“Perfect,” James clapped his hands together in excitement, “Go stand by your easel and look pretty while I paint you.”

Regulus rolled his eyes lightly, “this is not what these materials were meant to be used for,” he sighed, but complied with James' request.

James began squirting out various paints and mixing them together before diving in, while Regulus regarded the blank canvas thoughtfully.

“James, I’m not an artist either. Are we really doing portraits of one another?”

“Yes, may the best non-artist win,” James grinned, staring at Regulus before returning back to his canvas. “I’m already making a lot of progress, you should be nervous.”

Regulus smiled and began to mix colours of his own. For a while they worked in silence, occasionally glancing up from their easels to look at one another in an attempt to replicate a semblance of the other person down on canvas.

Sometimes Regulus would make comments about how it was a little dark to be painting and James would quip that the candlelight created ambience which was important on a date. Regulus would curse and frown to himself while working on his painting while James would stare entirely too long at Regulus and forget that he was supposed to be painting anything at all.

“What are your plans after the heist is done,” James asked after a while.

Regulus gave a little frown. “I don’t have any,” he said at last. “The heist is the peak I think. There is nothing after that for me. I’ve just been working towards this.”

James regarded him tenderly, “you don’t have anywhere you want to go? Anyone you want to see?”

Regulus thought for a moment, “I know Evan has plans to go to Las Vegas afterwards. I might follow him there. It hardly seems like the place for me, but who knows? I could go back to France. I don’t know. I want to plant a garden somewhere, I think that would be nice, but that’s really all I suppose. I haven’t really thought about it.” He moved his brush over the canvas carefully. “What about you?”

“Well I was going to use the money to apologise to Remus; pay for him to go back to school and get as many degrees as he wanted, but now that he’s here I don’t really know either. I suppose I'll go to Brazil. I’ve always wanted to go.”

Regulus smiled softly. “Why Brazil?”

“The beaches, the carnival, the mountains. I think it’s beautiful there, and there’s always something to do. I’d like to have a house there too, I think that would be nice.”

Regulus hummed quietly thinking of the crystal blue waters and green mountains. Brazil did seem awfully nice.

“Alright, I’ve finished,” James exclaimed, admiring his work proudly. “Are you ready to see it?”

“Stop,” Regulus said quickly. “I’m putting the final touches on mine hold on.” He began running his brush over the canvas frantically, adding some last-minute details. “Okay,” he said after a minute, standing back to get a full view of his painting. “I’m ready.”

James bounded over and stood beside Regulus, their shoulders touching. He admired the canvas thoughtfully. Regulus had captured his hair quite well. It was wild and windswept and his glasses glinted gold on his painted face. The edges were hazy like James existed in a dream state on the canvas.

“And you said you weren’t an artist,” James shook his head. “Regulus, this is incredible.”

“Your face proportions are a little off, I couldn’t get them exactly right,” He frowned a little. “But I did try.”

There was a slight pink tint to James’ cheeks which made him appear incredibly soft and vibrant and he reached out to touch them without thinking.

Regulus quickly slapped his hand away, “the paint is still wet. Wait until it dries yeah?”

“Right,” James shook his head. “Sorry.”

“Okay let’s see yours,” Regulus said walking over to James’ easel.

“Well when I said I wasn’t an artist, I actually meant it. I wasn’t lying like you, so it’s not as good,” James explained quickly.

When Regulus looked at it he froze. The first thing that he noticed was his eyes. The colour was identical. James had gotten the colour exactly right. That green-grey. Regulus' eyes had always been his favourite thing about himself and all the care and detail and time James had spent on that part of the portrait, was evident and it took Regulus' breath away. The other thing about the painting is that it was so incredibly bright. The colours weren't muted greys and blacks that Regulus would've used to portray himself, they were greens and blues and pinks.

Regulus had never seen himself like this before, he couldn't quite understand it and he couldn't look away. "It's so bright," he murmured at last, once he was aware that James was waiting for a response from him.

James nodded. "I noticed all the portraits you have, in your house. Dorcas and I looked at all of them the first day we were here. I think they might be family portraits, and I looked for yours, but I couldn't find one. They were all dark and dull and harsh and imposing."

Regulus listened to James as he continued to stare at the canvas.

"And then, I realised, it makes sense why yours wouldn't be up there. You're bright and vivid and electrifying. I mean you're a fucking star, Regulus, and I know I didn't do you nearly enough justice but-"

Before he could finish his sentence, Regulus spun around and crashed his lips onto James', cutting him off.

Every nerve ending in James lit up at once, as he leaned into the kiss.

Finally, he thought. *Finally.*

He went to wrap his arms around Regulus, to pull him closer but Regulus broke away quickly.

"No," he said sharply, taking several steps back. "That was a mistake. This was a mistake."

And James felt his heart sink just as quickly as it had soared seconds before.

"Regulus," James said carefully. It didn't feel like a mistake to him.

"No! I shouldn't have done that," he said quickly shaking his head. He closed his eyes, with a pained expression on his face before heading towards the door. "I'm sorry."

"Regulus, wait don't go," James called desperately. "Just stay we can…talk about it or something. Just don't leave."

"Fucking hell," Regulus muttered, ignoring James completely as he almost sprinted out the door, closing it behind him.

James stood, cemented to the spot where Regulus had kissed him. Carefully he traced his fingers over his lips where Regulus had just been, moments before. That kiss was a lot of things, but it certainly wasn't a mistake. He stared at the floor, trying to contemplate what to

do next, trying to understand what Regulus walking out meant. Then, a few seconds later, the sound of the door opening and closing again caused James to snap his head up.

Before he could process what was happening, Regulus' mouth was back on his, insatiable and rough. He guided James back, back, back, until he was pressed up against the wall, hitting it with a soft thud. Regulus bit his bottom lip harshly and James moaned, letting his eyes flutter closed.

"It wasn't a mistake," Regulus panted.

"It wasn't a mistake." he shook his head and Regulus attached his lips back to James', his glasses pressing into Regulus' face a bit uncomfortably, but he didn't care.

It was months of build-up being released, and one of James' hands flew to the back of Regulus' neck, trying to pull him closer, his fingers playing with the curls. Regulus' tongue slipped past James' lips as he tried to taste every little noise and gasp he was letting out.

And God he was perfect, he was so perfect. He was a star and he was burning through James with such a pure unfiltered, hot bright, white light, he couldn't think. He could barely stand.

"This is what I was afraid of," Regulus murmured, planting open-mouthed kisses along James' jaw and down his neck. James' hands were carding through Regulus' hair, pulling lightly at the roots, causing him to let out a soft gasp.

"Afraid of what?"

Regulus moved back up to James' mouth kissing him roughly, as if he couldn't get enough. His cool hands snaked up underneath James' shirt, laying flush against his already warm skin and sending a shiver through him. They trailed up his abdomen and to his biceps, squeezing slightly, tracing softly. The cold metal of his rings was driving James insane.

"Afraid of what," James gasped out again, as Regulus pressed himself up against James further and licked a stripe up the side of his neck before biting down on his earlobe.

"You. It was never going to be just one kiss for me," Regulus whispered lowly in James' ear, emitting a whine from him. "I can't stop, I want you."

"I don't want you to stop," James breathed, sliding his leg in between Regulus'. "I don't want you to stop. You can have me. You have me," he murmured shamelessly, grabbing the belt loops on Regulus' trousers and using them to grind Regulus' hips down onto his own.

The whine he let out at the friction was enough for James to almost blackout. He thrusted upwards whilst simultaneously directing Regulus' hips against his own, a slew of noises coming out of his mouth.

"You work for me," Regulus gasped out, his eyes closed as James ran a hand underneath his shirt, along his back.

"I don't care."

“This is going to end badly.”

James thrust up harder, his lips ghosting over Regulus’ pulse point. “I don’t care.”

“I’m bad for you,” he gasped out.

“Regulus, you’re fucking perfect,” his voice came out so raw and wrecked, Regulus’ breath hitched in his throat.

Nimbly, he began unbuttoning the buttons on James’ shirt before sucking harshly on his collarbone, causing James to let out another groan.

“You drive me crazy,” Regulus murmured into his skin, nipping at it with his teeth before soothing the area with his tongue. “God, coming into class with all your buttons undone. Making me break all my own damn rules.”

All James could do was gasp and whine. He was utterly lost in the feeling of Regulus Black.

Regulus’ mouth returned to his, still needy but more passionate. James wrapped his arms around Regulus and explored every square inch of his skin as he let Regulus grind down on him instinctively.

“Fuck Regulus, you’re so fucking beautiful,” James moaned looking at Regulus with wide, blown-out eyes full of lust. “I want you like this, here forever,” James began mumbling into the crook of Regulus' neck as he began to plant sloppy kisses there.

“James,” Regulus let his eyes close and his head roll back to give him easier access, the feeling of being embarrassingly close washed over him. “James,” he sighed over and over again like a prayer.

They were both so far gone, there was no turning back.

James’ movements underneath him began to get sloppy, “Fuck, Regulus, if you don’t stop I’m going t-to-”

Regulus moved his hands down to help guide James’ hips against his own.

“Do it,” Regulus whispered. “God, James please,” he whined, moving quicker, taking in James’ wrecked expression. “Please.”

The sound of Regulus’ voice, desperate and whiny and husky all at the same time was enough for James and he let himself go with a string of noises, his head rolling back to hit the wall.

The sight of James coming undone quickly put Regulus over the edge and after a few more seconds of grinding his hips down he followed with a loud moan that James tried to silence quickly by kissing him.

After a minute, they both broke away, panting heavily.

“Regulus,” James sighed and Regulus pressed his lips softly against James’s. He couldn’t help himself.

James wrapped his arms around Regulus tightly and relished the feeling of Regulus sinking into him, both of them supported by the wall.

“I just fucking came in my pants like I was fifteen,” Regulus sighed into James, not sounding at all upset about it. “Didn’t even make it to a bedroom.”

James let out a laugh that rumbled through his chest which made Regulus smile.

“What now,” James asked after a moment and Regulus pulled away, standing up straight.

“Now I change out of these clothes and take a shower,” he deadpanned.

“Sure, but I mean-”

“Well we already broke the rules,” Regulus began slowly, cutting off James. He bit his lip looking at James' soft brown eyes, looking back at him pleadingly.

James nodded quickly.

“So if we continue to break them, at this point it doesn’t matter does it?” Regulus was always foolishly easy when it came to James Potter. Fuck it, if he wanted more, he would give him more. He would try.

James gave a blinding smile, before moving forward to kiss Regulus again. “Good,” he murmured when they pulled away. “Good. Because I want to kiss you forever. Now that I know what it feels like, I don't ever want to stop.” He kissed him again, just to reinforce his previous statement. “You’re so lovely Regulus.”

And he blushed. Regulus Black blushed. “After the heist,” he began, but then stopped himself, closing his mouth. He suddenly seemed more upset. “We can’t-this has to be a secret. You know that right?”

James nodded again. “I won’t say anything, I would never say anything,” he tried to reassure him, placing his lips softly to Regulus’ forehead.

“Alright,” Regulus spoke once James pulled away. “I’m going to go; look the sun’s coming up,” he nodded to the window where the sky was turning a soft pink, it was the same flush pink colour of Regulus’ blush. “Thank you for the date, it was perfect,” he whispered softly, trying to keep the words and the memories close to his chest. He crossed the room to pick up James’ painting and quietly walked out, not even bothering to hide the smile on his face.

As soon as James heard Regulus’ footsteps recede down the stairs he let out a laugh of sheer giddiness. It bubbled up out of him and he sighed contentedly. He had never been this happy in his entire life, he was sure of it. His mind was hazy and clouded with thoughts of Regulus - only Regulus. He had said after the heist. That meant he wanted James around, in the future. And God would James be there, wherever Regulus was, he would follow for as long as he would let him.

James went around blowing out all of the candles and cleaning up the room quickly before heading back downstairs to take a shower himself. He wore a soft smile throughout the early morning, feeling light as air, until he finally floated into bed, dreaming of green eyes and soft curly hair.

Chapter End Notes

Fifteen chapters in, how are we feeling?
over 60,000 words before one jegulus kiss but it happened

Chapter 16: Tea in bed

Chapter Summary

Quotidian life of James Potter

Chapter Notes

I am putting these chapters out so quickly because I hate leaving things incomplete! the sooner this whole story comes together the better I say!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

To say that James was happy would be a grave understatement. He was flying, floating, soaring through the days. They all began to bleed into one another in a streak of Regulus Black.

Regulus was much more reserved than James in public, he was always hyper-aware of the presence of others at all times, and from the outside, it would appear as if he was colder to James than before. He would avoid making eye contact with him in class, call on others before he acknowledged James' raised hand, and he sat as far away from him as possible during meals.

James paid no mind to this at all because what they didn't see was Regulus' hands pulling him into a tiny hidden room on the third floor when no one was around, or the sly touches and quick kisses in the kitchen they would share when James was making dinner, or the fond looks Regulus would give him when no else was around. And they certainly didn't see James sneak down the stairs nearly every night to slip into Regulus' room.

The nights he spent with Regulus were his favourite in a long list of favourite things he had started making when it came to Regulus. His room was warm and always smelled like cinnamon and tea. There were still a million things scattered everywhere, books, and charts, and close-up renderings of art details. James couldn't get enough of looking at all of it, it was a tiny glimpse into Regulus' mind. To see all the things Regulus drew inspiration from, thought important, and wanted to look over. To James, was more valuable than any monetary sum. He tried to drink it all in, to save it in a special place in his mind.

He watched too as Regulus began to slowly let his walls down. As he went from reading quietly and letting James barely lay next to him in bed, to curling up close to him with his book, humming in appreciation as James ran his fingers through his hair. As he went from tangling his fingers tentatively with James' own to pressing soft kisses on his palm. As he

went from quiet observations to long-winded rants about whatever he was thinking about or reading. Regulus would ebb and flow like the tides, revealing himself little by little and then pulling back, but he would always return, and each time he did, he was a little more sure, a little more brave.

In that room, Regulus and James existed apart from anyone and anything else completely, and he was entirely sure that he could spend every single day there without the want of food or water, as long as he was with Regulus.

“You know, I’ve been thinking about after the heist,” James murmured one night into Regulus’ hair, his arms wrapped around him, holding him delicately to his bare chest.

“Have you,” Regulus sighed sleepily, his back facing James.

James knew he should probably try to sleep too. They had about a solid four hours before Regulus would be waking him up, whispering in his ear to sneak back upstairs before the others awoke. Neither of them got any sleep when they were together, but this never seemed to bother Regulus, who was always ready the next day with his mind as sharp as ever. James, on the other hand, had taken up Evan’s habit of falling asleep at the breakfast table.

“I have,” James hummed. “And it’s a good thing that you haven’t made any plans because I’ve made thousands for us.”

Regulus’ breath caught in his throat as James continued.

“We’re going to do everything, the possibilities are endless. I’m going to take you to a planetarium so you can tell me everything about the stars and the constellations because I know you like that kind of thing. And I want to take you to a carnival, not like the ones in Brazil but the ones with roller coasters and ferris wheels-and I know you’ll complain the whole time, but I’ll buy you candy floss in exchange for going on the ferris wheel with me. And we’re going to travel too. You can take me to France and show me all your favourite places, all the coffee shops you like and the local libraries. And we can go to every art museum in Germany and Amsterdam, surely there’s been some you haven’t seen. And we can visit Evan in Las Vegas. And then we’ll go to Br-”

“James,” Regulus said into the dark. Except it came out strangled, like James had hurt him somehow. It was the same way he had sounded in the bath that day, clutching at the Degas painting with the water spilling everywhere. “Stop.”

James furrowed his brows worriedly. “Regulus, what’s wrong?”

He was met with silence. He had half a mind to turn on a light, to at least see Regulus’ expression, to try to tell what he was thinking, but he didn’t want to let go of him. If his arms weren’t wrapped around him, James would be sure Regulus wasn’t breathing.

“I’m sorry,” James said quietly. “It was a stupid thought, you can just ignore me. Forget I said it. Of course you wouldn’t w-”

“No,” Regulus let out another wounded sound as if he were a small child again. There he was, deliberating whether to ebb or flow. “It’s just,” Regulus was struggling, his voice coming out strained. “It’s hard to have hope for things that might not happen,” he whispered so softly, his voice wavering.

“Why wouldn’t they happen, Reg?” James tried to quell the anxiousness he felt prickle in his stomach.

Silence.

“Why wouldn’t they happen,” James asked again, as he tried to keep his voice steady.

“You’ll leave,” this time his voice came out strong, as if this was a fact that had always been established, just as the grass was green and the sky was blue.

“No I won’t,” James said quietly without thinking.

“It’s okay,” Regulus said, back to his soft tone. “Everyone does eventually. I know it’s my fault, the only common denominator here is me. I always do something,” Regulus shook his head quickly and James felt his curls hit his face softly. “It’s like Donna Tartt said,” he seemed to sink further down into the bed, as if he was trying to hide. “I think my existence is tainted, in some subtle but essential way. So people leave.”

He was quiet for a moment, before he added, “I’m thankful to have you today, but I don’t expect to keep something so wonderful tomorrow.”

James thought back to that day in the bath.

‘Do you think it was my fault? That he left?’

“Not me,” James breathed into his hair, trying to hold him tighter, trying to tell him he’d be there, holding Regulus for the rest of his life if he’d let him. “Not me, I won’t leave you. You’re not tainted, Regulus. You’re so lovely.”

“Don’t make promises you can’t keep, James,” Regulus strained slightly against James’ grasp.

“Where else would I go if not with you?”

At that Regulus let out a yelp, it was watery, and he pushed against James' arms, using his hands to break James’ grasp.

James let go and Regulus scrambled out of bed and threw on his pyjama bottoms that were on the floor. James could make out Regulus' dark shadow hiding his face in his hands as he stood next to the bed.

“Regulus,” James sat up now, fumbling next to him for his glasses. “I’m sorry. I don’t mean to keep hurting you. I just don’t understand-”

“You’re not hurting me,” Regulus said, a little more shrill from behind his hands. “It’s me. It’s me,” he sighed.

James was quiet for a moment trying to figure out what to say; trying to figure out how they got here. It was his fault for saying anything at all, but he had no idea how to rectify it. He didn’t know how to grapple with the fact that Regulus was viewing them as living on borrowed time; every day he expected the rug to be pulled out from under him.

Regulus seemed to be debating what to do. He looked half ready to bolt for the door at any moment, which James knew wouldn't end well if he did. He might not come back.

“Regulus come back to bed, please,” James pleaded. “We can take everything one day at a time. And every day I’m still going to be here, and every night I’m going to come back as long as you want me to.”

“I’m going to do something that will make you hate me, James,” Regulus called into the dark.

“It’s not possible.”

Regulus let out a frustrated groan. Whether he was frustrated with James or himself, James couldn’t tell.

“Do you want me to go,” James asked tentatively, still staring at Regulus’ figure next to the bed.

“No,” Regulus let out a choked laugh. “That’s the problem. That’s the whole entire problem.”

“Okay,” James nodded slowly. “Okay. So tell me what to do. Tell me how to make this better.”

“I’m sorry, it’s me. I’m fucking everything up,” Regulus sighed. “You make things better just by being here, really.” Regulus let out a sigh, trying to calm down.

“Then come back to bed,” James patted the space next to him and Regulus crawled back in after a few beats of silence. He didn’t want to leave the conversation like this, he knew Regulus didn’t believe him, but it was a fight for another day. If Regulus wouldn’t listen to him, James would just have to show him, every day, that he wasn’t going anywhere.

This time Regulus curled up facing him, “I’m really sorry, James,” he said into his chest after a while.

“Stop apologising, you have nothing to apologise for,” he sighed into Regulus’ hair.

“I wish that was true.”

The next morning, well, more like three hours later, James woke to Regulus' cold hands shaking him.

"Jesus, are you trying to roll me out of bed," he grumbled sleepily.

"Have been for the last five minutes, you've got to get up," Regulus whispered quietly. "It's not my fault you're so," he was still rocking James back and forth, pushing on his back, "fucking sturdy," he grunted with the effort.

"That's a funny way to say toned, fit, and muscular," James grinned, his eyes still closed.

"James, get out of my room."

"We hardly slept last night, how do you have the energy to boss me around," James sighed sitting up.

"I drink a lot of coffee, and being your boss is my job, now get up," Regulus said again, throwing James' shirt at him. "Lily will be up in the kitchen making breakfast in ten minutes."

Slowly James ambled up and went to the door, used to this new routine. "If I fall asleep in class today, you'll forgive me?"

Regulus walked over and kissed him quickly. "No."

James grinned, still feeling butterflies every time Regulus was near, and walked out the door, heading back to his room for a few more minutes of sleep before breakfast.

That day's lesson was a hands-on experiment. Regulus went around and placed paintings on each person's desk. Each one of them was in a different frame, and then once he had finished that he passed out a set of tiny tools to everyone as well.

"Today, we're going to work through removing paintings from their frames and then putting them back in their frames. We're looking for efficiency here. You cannot under any circumstances ruin the painting, but you also need to be quick because time is of the essence," Regulus began.

"Why do we have to do this," Barty groaned out.

"Yeah, isn't it another class day where we're all here, but really it's just for Remus, Marlene, Mary, and Lily?" Evan added.

"No, it isn't," Regulus replied coolly. "We are preparing for every possible scenario. There might be a moment when one of them is unable to do their job. Or something may come up where they need an extra set of hands. I need to be confident that I can send someone else in there, and they'll know what to do. Because if I send either of you in, and you fuck this up, because you think this lesson didn't apply to you, you'll be dealing with me. So pay attention."

Barty and Evan nodded, still looking slightly miffed.

“Right so when you’re in there, you’ll need to remove the painting from the wall and place it face down on the floor as gently as possible. It’s crucial that you leave the nails hanging the painting in the wall so Lily and Mary have a guide on where to reframe,” Regulus looked pointedly at Remus and Marlene. “You want to make sure that you don’t shake any paint flakes loose, so be gentle. The paintings are most likely nailed to the frame, so you’ll take the needle nose pliers and remove all the nails from the back. Make sure you keep track of them, because you’ll need to take every last one with you. We’re leaving no evidence behind.”

Everyone was writing things down frantically as Regulus was speaking.

“Now you should be able to gently shake the painting free and ease it towards one side of the frame. Then you can lift it out at a slight angle. I cannot emphasise enough how careful you need to be. You need to be sure not to touch the paint, only the edges of the painting,” He gestured to the paintings resting on their desks and they began to put Regulus’ words into practice.

“It’s imperative that you leave the frames, and that you don’t damage them because Mary and Lily will be going in and using them to reframe the fakes.”

Lily and Mary were experts at this. They were quick and precise and nimble. Years of practice for their jobs gave them confidence the others didn’t have.

Regulus walked around the classroom observing everyone at work.

Remus and Marlene were doing well too, though Marlene was struggling with some of the nails. James found quiet ease in this work. He didn’t mind doing it, and found that he wasn’t heavy-handed like Barty and Evan or so meticulous and careful that it slowed him down like Dorcas and Peter.

Regulus watched him work briefly and James waited for a remark. A ‘nice work’ or a ‘good job, James’, but he just kept walking.

James fought the urge to roll his eyes and grin. It’s fine, he would just have to wait until tonight to hear Regulus’ praise.

Class ended soon enough with Regulus promising that they would all be doing this again with different-sized paintings, and next time he would be timing them until he was happy with their efficiency.

“Hey James,” Lily pulled him aside in the hallway after class had finished. “Can we talk for a minute?”

James nodded, his brow furrowed at her tone, and let Lily pull him by the arm down the hallway a little further.

She pushed her red hair out of her face before crossing her arms and glancing around conspiratorially. Her back was to the door of the classroom, but James saw Regulus walk out last, as he always did. Regulus turned and gave him an indecipherable look, raising his eyebrows before he headed down the stairs without a backwards glance.

“I think you need to talk to Remus,” Lily’s voice snapped James back into focus. “He’s been spending a lot of time with me and Mary in the studio and I think something is wrong,” she continued frowning slightly.

“Wrong? What do you mean? Is he okay,” James started, immediately feeling his concern grow.

“I think he’s fine, he could just benefit from talking to you I think,” Lily responded gently. “Maybe talk to him after dinner tonight, yeah?”

James nodded in agreement and Lily gave him a small smile before walking downstairs.

He felt slightly guilty after talking to Lily. Truthfully, James had noticed a change in Remus recently. He looked a little rough, like he wasn’t getting much sleep, but James hadn’t really talked to him much since the great datescapade, as he called it. He was too preoccupied with Regulus, and any free time he had, he normally spent with Regulus hiding away in some room or sneaking outside when everyone was distracted with other things.

He had asked Remus how it went that night, but Remus had kept everything very surface level, just that they had made their relationship official, which James was thrilled to hear, but Remus seemed slightly reserved about it.

James didn’t have much time to question Remus about it before he had changed the subject, and James had let it go.

In fairness, James was withholding a lot about Regulus as well. Ever since that night that Regulus kissed him, he had practically stopped bringing him up at all, just to be safe. He wanted to tell anyone who would listen about Regulus, but he held it close to his chest for Regulus’ sake.

After dinner, he made his way up to Remus’ room and knocked on the door softly. He could hear thrumming music coming from Barty’s room a few doors down and Peter singing to himself rather loudly in another room.

“Come in,” Remus called and James stepped in.

Remus was laying on his back in his bed with his flip phone on his chest.

“Is now a bad time,” James asked, not bothering to hear the answer before he sat down on the floor next to Remus’ bed.

“No, what’s up,” Remus sighed slightly.

“I was hoping you could tell me. What’s going on, Remus? You’ve been in a mopey state lately. I thought things were going well with you and Sirius?”

At that, Remus let out a groan. “They are going well. Too well.”

“Well I’m here to listen if you want to talk,” James explained patiently, waiting for Remus to elaborate.

Remus was silent for a few moments, staring up at the ceiling.

“I agreed to be his boyfriend, and it should’ve been a good thing. Like I should be overwhelmingly happy right now, and I was when I said it, but now he’s talking about moving to America for me and trying to accommodate for my fake PhD that I’m getting and listening to him try to plan for something that’s based on a total lie makes me so ill. I get nauseous because I’ve been lying to him this entire time, and I let this go too far, but I don’t want to lose him,” Remus choked out. “I’m the most selfish person in the world, because I keep letting him believe in this lie so that I can have him around, and I don’t know what to do. Tell me what to do.”

James could hear the distress in Remus’ voice, and felt guilty that he had left him here to grapple with all of this by himself, while he was out focused on Regulus. He should’ve checked in more. He should’ve been around to help.

James was quiet for a moment trying to think his way through this. “What if you-”

“-I swear to God if you say tell him the truth I’ll kick you out of my room right now. Admitting to my boyfriend that I’m about to be a criminal is not the answer.”

“No,” James looked at the floor in thought. “What if you just told him that you wanted to wait a little while before moving forward? Take a bit of a break until after the heist? You can say you need to focus on your studies or something.”

“That’s not very James Potter defender of love and lovers everywhere of you.” Remus’ voice cracked.

James ran his fingers through his hair, trying to think. “I don’t know what to do either, but it’s clearly killing you, lying to him. If you’re meant to be together then what’s waiting a few months?”

James could tell as soon as he’d said it, that Remus wouldn’t listen to him. This was an obvious conclusion Remus had probably already reached on his own, and if he hadn’t already followed through with it, he most likely wouldn’t.

“Because I think it’ll kill me not having him around. Not talking to him all the time. A few months will feel like a lifetime.”

“The longer you lie to him the worse it’s going to be,” James sighed pointedly into the silence. He thought for a few minutes more before he spoke again. “Maybe I could talk to Regulus and-”

Remus’ laughter made James stop mid-sentence. It was wild and erratic and it made James smile despite himself.

“I knew it! I knew you would say something insane like that, wouldn’t you? Oh my God James,” Remus was still laughing as he threw a pillow from his bed down at him, pelting him in the shoulder.

“Well you’re not helping at all,” James called, indignantly, throwing the pillow back up so it hit Remus with a soft thud.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry,” Remus tried to catch his breath.

“What are you going to do,” James asked once Remus had calmed down.

“Run away?”

“Regulus would find you before you got ten minutes from this house.”

Remus turned over and groaned into his pillow. “I don’t know. I don’t know.”

“Well think about what I said. I’m here for you, whatever you decide. If it’s meant to be, it’ll work out,” James tried his best to make Remus feel better, but even he knew it was a lousy attempt. “Do you want to go annoy Peter to take your mind off of it for a while,” James asked hopefully. If he couldn’t give Remus a proper solution to his problem, he could at least distract him from it for a little while.

Remus let out another heavy sigh before sitting up. “Yeah, let’s go.”

James hated seeing Remus like this. He was under the impression that everyone deserved to be happy and couldn’t stand when they weren’t, especially his friends, who deserved nothing but the best experiences life had to offer. He frowned as he followed Remus to Peter’s room vowing to think up solutions to his problem tonight.

That night, he snuck down to Regulus’ room. He was sitting on his bed waiting for James. He had two cups of hot tea ready and he handed one to James as he walked in.

“I’m back. It’s a new day and I’m here,” James said, sitting down. He couldn’t help himself.

Regulus let out a long sigh and closed his eyes. “James, last night was... maybe we can refrain from talking about it?”

James paused for a moment, drinking his tea. “Fine. For now, but I’m not letting it go.”

Regulus just blinked at him. “I saw you talking to Lily today after class,” he said coolly after a minute, desperate to change the subject.

“Oh yeah,” James nodded as Regulus got into bed.

“She’s…pretty.”

“Regulus.”

“What? I’m just saying. You two were standing awfully close in the hallway. You looked like you were discussing something important.”

“Regulus,” James grinned. “Are you jealous?”

“Don’t be ridiculous.” Regulus’ cheeks turned slightly pink. “I couldn’t care less.”

“Well she was just asking me about Remus, so you have no reason to worry,” James couldn’t help feeling elated. “Should I be worried? Considering you think she’s pretty and you have a habit of sleeping with your employees.”

Regulus’ eyes went wide and he set his tea down, before grabbing James’ tea and setting it down too. Before James could question his actions, Regulus shoved him so hard that he nearly tumbled out of bed.

“Sorry, couldn't risk you spilling tea on my sheets,” Regulus said shaking his head as James laughed.

“I couldn’t help it,” James smiled as Regulus rolled his eyes, but even he looked slightly amused. “Can I have my tea back please?”

Carefully, Regulus handed him his tea, before he picked up his own cup and took a drink.

James had never felt more content in his entire life, everything just felt perfect. Every moment spent with Regulus was James living life to the fullest extent, he was sure of it. The heist wasn’t the answer to the excitement and adventure James had been missing in his life before, Regulus was.

“Tell me about your book again,” James sighed, smiling softly at the look of eagerness on Regulus’ face.

“Okay, so,” Regulus smiled scooting closer to James with his tea. “Rodolphe has seduced Emma. Successfully now, and everyone knows. The whole town is talking about their affair, but Charles is oblivious.”

“And Charles is her boring bad, country doctor husband?”

“Yes,” Regulus nodded, his eyes lighting up. “But don’t hate Charles, I sort of like him even if he is a fool.”

James listened as Regulus explained the plot of his book he was reading and soon they fell into a peaceful conversation.

Before he knew it, Regulus’ cold hands were on him, shaking him awake for the next morning.

Chapter End Notes

I love Donna Tartt so Regulus loves Donna Tartt I don't make the rules (i do) sorry .

Chapter 17: Reunions

Chapter Summary

Buckle up people.

Chapter Notes

Tw: brief mentions of gun violence, mentions of child abuse

please lmk if i missed anything!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It has to be done. This was always part of the plan. It has to be done.

Regulus gripped the steering wheel tighter.

Well, it didn't have to be done. He had half a mind to abandon everything. His entire life's work, his magnum opus, his purpose, he would give it all up for James Potter. He wouldn't even have to ask.

But that would leave so many things unresolved. He had a team, a group of people that he promised exorbitant amounts of money to. People who had already put in months of work into this job and expected to be paid for it.

He also couldn't forget what he had said to Lucius the night of the auction. He promised there would be paintings, and normally, while he would say fuck Lucius Malfoy, he had told him to tell the others, and Mulciber and Lestrange would certainly come to collect; James couldn't be around when they did.

Most importantly, there was the matter of Sirius. There were a lot of reasons for this heist, a lot of time and effort spent, years of childhood that were robbed from him in preparation for this specifically, and sure, there was the enticement of notoriety, a legacy that would remain long after he died, but most importantly it was *the heist* . The catalyst for a reunion, the bridge between divides, the reunification of family. Provided Sirius wasn't so fucking stubborn.

But Regulus knew he was stubborn. Regulus knew that better than anyone, which is why it has to be done. This was always a part of the plan. It has to be done.

He needed his hands to stop shaking. They had a mind of their own, but they couldn't shake for what he was about to do. He needed complete composure if this was going to work. He needed to be untouchable; unshakable.

James would hate him, which was fair. He shouldn't care that James Potter was going to hate him. If he had stuck to his plan completely, if he had followed his own rules, it wouldn't have mattered. If everyone had followed the fucking rules, none of this would have mattered. He tried to push this fact down, he tried not to deal with this until he absolutely had to. He tried not to feel anything about anything until it was absolutely necessary.

He hadn't slept a single second when James came into his room the night before. He lay awake, listening to his steady breathing, feeling his arms wrapped around him tightly. James Potter was his own personal sun, warm and golden on his cold bones. No amount of time with James would be long enough; the least Regulus could do was stay awake to extend the few remaining moments he had with him.

And now he was in the car, driving to ruin another good thing that's happened to him. Good things so rarely happened to him, they were so fleeting. He always tried to appreciate them when they did happen, but it was inevitable that he would ruin them. They were so rare in his life, whenever he had a glimmer of good, he didn't know what to do with it, how to care for it, how to keep it. It seemed that destruction was all that he knew how to do properly, he didn't know why.

"Fuck," he muttered hitting the steering wheel sharply with the palm of his hand. "Fuck," he yelled louder and hit the wheel harder, feeling the tendrils of pain shoot through him.

It has to be done. He looked at the envelope sitting in the passenger seat. He needed to stick to the plan. This was always a part of the plan. It has to be done.

—---

Sirius knew who it was before he opened the door, before he had looked through the peephole, or unbolted the deadbolts, he knew. Regulus always had that distinct sharpness about him, all business-like, with no room for error or fault. His knock was no different.

Sirius stood there for a minute, not moving an inch. He could see the shadows of Regulus' feet from under the door. He knew Regulus would come back, he had said as much, he thought he would be prepared, but of course, he wasn't. How could he be?

"Sirius, open the door. A deadbolt has never stopped me before, but I don't have time to waste," Regulus called out flatly from the other side.

Sirius began picking up his feet and dragging himself towards the entrance. They felt like cinder blocks at the end of his ankles, yet he felt the slight prickle of excitement too. This

time, Regulus would slip up, this time he would say something incriminating, leave a thread behind that would unravel him.

He went to the top drawer of his dresser and pulled out the pepper spray he had bought in preparation for this. It was no paralytic, but it could at least cause Regulus some sort of pain if he needed it to.

He began unlocking all the locks on his door and when he swung it open to reveal Regulus, he took a step back instinctively.

“How nice of you to knock this time,” Sirius bit sharply. “Real considerate.”

“We’re leaving. Let’s go,” Regulus ignored him from the doorway.

“What makes you think I’d go anywhere in a car with you,” Sirius arched his brow, staring down Regulus defiantly.

“Because I’m finally going to tell you everything. Everything you want to know. And because you have that pepper spray to protect you,” Regulus glanced at the tube Sirius was clutching tightly. “And because you owe me an answer to my question.”

Sirius opened his mouth to speak but Regulus held up his hand, “not here.”

“Where would we go then?”

“Somewhere public. I know a coffee shop. Does that work for you,” Regulus responded, not really caring if it worked for Sirius or not.

Sirius thought about it. He was actually considering it. Regulus was tempting him with information about the heist. This was his job, his duty was to find out the nature of this crime before it happened. So naturally, he should go, to fulfil the duties of his job. He wasn't stupid, he knew Regulus wasn't willingly going to tell him anything. But if he could sit his brother down, and get him talking, then maybe, just maybe, something might slip.

“I’m not going to do anything in public Sirius, come on,” Regulus sighed exasperatedly.

“No plans on paralysing me then,” Sirius shot out again.

Regulus blinked slowly. “I want you to know that everything I do is out of necessity.”

“Keep telling yourself that.”

“Get in the fucking car, Sirius.”

Sirius could feel his heart hammering. He counted the beats as they thrummed in his ears. “Fine.” He grabbed his leather jacket from the hotel bed and flung it on. Another piece of armour. Regulus was already stalking down the hallway and towards the stairs with his long self-assured stride.

“We’re not taking the lift,” Sirius huffed after him as Regulus rounded down another flight of stairs. “We’re on the eighth floor.”

“And risk standing there next to you in silence? I don’t think so.”

Soon they were outside and Regulus slid into the driver’s seat of the car. Sirius hesitated for a moment, his hand on the car door handle.

“If you leave now, you’ll learn nothing. You’ll have nothing,” Regulus taunted. “And I’ll drive away and I promise you, it’ll be the last time you ever see me.”

Sirius sighed heavily and got in the car. “If you try anything, and I mean fucking anything, I will pepper spray your eyes so hard you’ll be blind.”

“Sure.” Regulus put the car in drive and pulled off.

They drove in silence. It was heavy and humid and Sirius nearly felt suffocated by it. Maybe he could convince Regulus to call off the heist before it was too late, maybe he could stop something catastrophic from happening. Maybe he could finally get through to him and keep him safe, if he wasn’t so fucking stubborn. He was always so fucking stubborn.

“Wait, I know this place,” Sirius spoke as they pulled up. It was the same café he’d been to with Remus.

Regulus didn't respond.

They got out of the car and walked inside, the chime of the bell caused the girl at the counter to look up at them and she smiled.

“What is that,” Sirius glanced down at the large envelope Regulus was carrying with him. “Anthrax?”

“Nothing that concerns you for the present,” Regulus snapped in response.

Sirius felt odd and out of place next to Regulus, doing mundane things like ordering coffee. It made him sad. He recalled a time when they were younger, when they were so in sync, they could anticipate each other's movements and thoughts without a single word. There was a time when they worked, when they made sense, and now everything was warped beyond recognition. Now they were strangers.

Sirius also hated that he was following Regulus around like a dog, chasing after him down the stairs at the hotel, trailing after him as he entered the café, and straggling after him as he took a seat at an empty table outside. Regulus always had to be in control of every little thing, it left Sirius scrambling to catch up.

Sirius looked across the street pathetically. He knew Remus wasn’t working today, but he wished he was. At least then he could go into the museum and find him after whatever horrible conversation with Regulus ensued.

Regulus was quiet, scrutinising Sirius under his dark and heavy gaze, the same apathetic look adorned his face. His eyes were grey, the same colour of a brewing storm, it unsettled him that he couldn't see the green in them today.

“Well start talking, or I’m leaving,” Sirius said at last, no longer comfortable with the weight of Regulus’ gaze on him. He felt like he was taking him apart. Atom by atom.

“Last time we spoke,” Regulus began, looking down at the coffee in his hands. “I asked you to join me. All you’ve been trying to do these last few years is stop me. But imagine what we could do if you joined me? What have you done with your life Sirius? Huh? How will you be remembered?”

“Beating death is something that you’ve always been obsessed with. Outliving time is your thing, Regulus. I could give a damn what people think of me when I’m dead.”

“That’s the thing Sirius, people won’t think of you at all.”

Sirius remained silent. There were worse fates. But not to Regulus. Regulus' biggest fear was always being forgotten.

“Any new information on the case,” Regulus spoke again, his eyes flicking up to meet Sirius’.

“We know you went to an auction a few towns over. Frank found you on the security footage, and your name on the list of registered bidders. That was a little reckless of you, don't you think?” Sirius raised his eyebrows.

“Maybe,” Regulus shrugged nonchalantly. “And what did you learn from my presence at the auction house? Anything riveting?”

“One of your business associates. Tall man, with the round gold glasses? Pandora is trying to determine his identity now. And we also know Lucius was in attendance that night as well,” Sirius smirked, finally pleased he had progress to show.

“What Lucius does in his free time certainly has nothing to do with me,” Regulus grumbled.

“You and I both know that’s a lie.”

Regulus gave him a sharp look.

“Sirius,” Regulus said levelly, but he was gripping his coffee cup tighter. “I-”

“No, there’s something that’s been bothering me since you broke into my hotel room.”

Regulus stopped, and waited for Sirius to continue, regarding him coolly.

“Did you really call Andromeda that night?” He stared at Regulus, hardly daring to blink.

“Yes.”

“See, I have a hard time believing that considering that Orion didn’t bring phones on swaps, and he certainly didn’t allow us to have one, so-” his eyes narrowed.

“So I used a payphone. A few blocks down the street. I followed dad out, but I ran as he was loading his men up in the car. And I called Andromeda.”

Sirius blinked rapidly.

“He drove around the neighbouring streets looking for me and when he found me, still standing by the phone he-,” Regulus took a sharp inhale.

“So he went looking for you,” Sirius let out a bitter laugh. “One son shot, bleeding out, and the other just ran away and you’re the one he went after. That seems about right.”

“He broke my fingers that night. The ones I used to dial Andromeda.”

“Well that was Orion wasn’t it,” Sirius snapped to quell the feeling of nausea rising in his stomach. “And you want me to help you in this heist, in this-this thing that he planned, knowing who he is, and what he did?”

“It’s not about him,” Regulus banged his hand down on the table, causing two girls who were sitting close to them to look over. Regulus closed his eyes for a moment before he opened them, appearing more composed. “This plan was always meant for two people. I’m good, I’m more than capable of doing it myself, but if I had another set of eyes on it. If you-” he took a deep breath in, “This is something that should be done together. You know it, and I know it.”

“And you think that I would what? Abandon my job, my friends, my morals-”

“Your morals? You loved it,” Regulus seethed. “You were more excited about working with dad than I was! You loved what we were doing, *you* loved the thrill.”

“That was before I grew up and realised how fucking dangerous it was! That we could get killed, that other people were getting killed. I wasn't going to keep doing that. To stay there and watch you get hurt, or watch you hurt someone else, Jesus. We were the bad guys, Regulus. Fuck, don’t you want to be good for once? To see how it feels? Doing the right thing?"

Regulus flinched. If Sirius thought about it too long, he was sure he might feel bad about it, but for now, he could convince himself that he imagined it.

“You don’t believe that. You were born to do this, all your talent is being wasted,” Regulus spoke blandly.

“Well, I’m not going with you,” Sirius spoke at last. “I can’t.” His voice came out more strained than he would like it to. “There’s your answer.”

“Not even if it meant that we could work together again? Work towards something?”

Sirius would be lying if he said part of the heist didn’t entice him. The thrill, the rush of it all when he was younger. There was something to say for fulfilling what you were meant to do.

Finding what you were best at, and then putting it into practice was an electrifying thing. But he couldn't go back. He couldn't do that.

"Why does it have to be going to you," Sirius shook his head. "Why is that the only way? Why can't you be done with all of this? Give it up and we can work towards something else?"

Regulus let out a noise of frustration and gave Sirius a look that reminded him so much of when they were younger, he had the sudden urge to apologise. He wasn't sure what for, all of it, none of it, something in between.

"What are you working towards Sirius? Huh? Tell me?"

Sirius was struck by the weight of his words.

"Because you know me. You said it yourself. I'm working to outlive time, to beat death, to create a legacy that will outlive me and you and the next generation and the one after that and I'm asking you to help me do that."

Regulus' voice was still calm but it wavered just slightly. Sirius knew it wasn't easy for him to sit here, for him to ask in his own roundabout way for help. If that was even what it was. He also couldn't help the gnawing suspicion that there was some other, underlying motive. He learned to stop trusting Regulus long ago, to question everything when it came to his younger brother.

"Regulus you're not listening to me. It's dangerous. It's fucking dangerous and you're enabling bad people."

"I couldn't give a fuck about them. I'm doing this for me. And it wouldn't be dangerous if we did it together. We'd be unstoppable. Why can't you see that? Why are you so afraid of what we could do together? All that power? Why can't you do this for me, huh?" Regulus was getting more erratic by the second.

"Everything I've ever done has been for you!"

"Fuck off. I'm not indulging you in the lies you tell yourself to help you sleep better at night."

The two girls had stopped talking again to look over at them again, and Regulus lowered his voice to barely a whisper.

"So the answer is no?"

"The answer is no." Sirius was standing on the precipice of something, he was on the edge, he could feel it in his bones. Regulus always had a habit of leading people right to the edge of a cliff. Always goading them to jump.

Regulus nodded from across from him. It was slow as if he were trying to still time, to avoid this moment for as long as he possibly could, and then he picked up the large envelope that

was resting on the table beside his hand. Sirius had almost forgotten about that envelope sitting there so innocuously.

“Finally going to show me what you brought with you then? Share with the class.”

Regulus opened the envelope silently and rifled through it. He pulled out a glossy photograph and laid it in front of Sirius. Upon looking at it, his mouth went dry. He felt the wind being knocked out of his lungs and he actually had to blink several times to process what he was looking at.

It was a photograph of him and Remus, sitting outside this very café at the next table over, on their first date. It appeared as if it was taken from a traffic camera on the street.

“Regulus what the fuck is-”

He laid out another photo silently on top of the old one. It was a photo of him and Remus kissing on his motorbike.

Another one.

Him and Remus leaving the museum hand in hand.

Sirius knew what he was implying with these photographs.

Another one.

Him and Remus leaving dinner.

“Regulus you fucking leave him out of this do you hear me? You fucking stay away from him or I swear to God.” Sirius couldn’t even form completely coherent thoughts. He was toeing the line between panic and rage, they were both mixing together and boiling his blood in blinding red.

“Leave him out of this,” Regulus let out a sharp laugh. “That’s funny.”

Sirius felt like he was going to throw up. His hands were shaking, whether from panic or rage, he couldn’t tell.

“Listen to me carefully,” Regulus said lowly leaning in. There was no emotion behind his glinting eyes. “You yell? I call Evan Rosier. You remember him? You make a move to get up? I call Rosier. You reach for your phone? I call Rosier. You do anything? I call Rosier, and you don’t want me to call Rosier.”

Sirius tried to breathe, he tried to force air into his aching lungs but he just couldn’t seem to. Or maybe he was breathing and his lungs were just cracked, broken all of a sudden.

“Because the second his phone lights up and it’s my name on the caller ID, he has instructions to shoot and kill Remus Lupin.”

He laid down another photo in front of Sirius. It was one that was taken after Remus had left Sirius' new hotel room in the middle of the night, his clothes dishevelled. "I gather you two are rather close now, after all these months."

"Regulus," Sirius' voice came out in a strained whisper. "Please don't do this. Please, please leave him out of this. I'll do anything you want just please, don't hurt him. Please."

It was panic. It was an acute kind of panic, one where Sirius couldn't really feel his body anymore. It was almost as if he had floated out of it entirely. Rendered completely useless. Paralytics had nothing on this feeling taking over him. He wasn't above begging now, he would rage later. Right now he was trapped, he was terrified, and the entire time, Regulus didn't even seem to flinch.

"I thought you would say that," Regulus blinked slowly.

Regulus didn't give Sirius the option to choose to jump off the cliff; he led him to the edge and then he fucking pushed him.

"It's funny," Regulus laid out another photograph. "How quickly you're willing to abandon your morals. Your job. Your friends. For him. For someone you barely know, but your own brother?" Regulus hummed, his eyes burning holes into Sirius. "What is it about me that's not worth it? Why am I not ever enough for you?"

"I know Remus. Remus is good and kind and he's everything that you aren't," Sirius bit lowly, feeling the edge of anger come back to him.

"He works for me, Sirius."

"What?" He had been kicked in the stomach. He had cracked lungs and now Regulus' words had landed a blow to his stomach. Sirius was being battered.

"He's under my employment. I hired him for the heist, back in England. He was a barista. He seems like your type doesn't he? I thought about that when I hired him."

"Stop Regulus, stop. Stop," Sirius was sure he was going to throw up. He had to close his eyes. Everything was suddenly too much all of a sudden, he needed to shut all of his senses off, he needed to breathe, he couldn't breathe.

"He was the backup plan. The original plan, naively, was that you would come to your senses on your own. Accept my offer, and join the heist, but you're stubborn. Always so fucking stubborn, so what if you said no? I needed to account for the fact that you would say no. Enter Remus Lupin. My trojan horse," Regulus continued.

It wasn't worth anything to Sirius, but Regulus doesn't appear to be enjoying this at all, in fact, he looked rather ill himself. At least he wasn't taking pleasure in his cruelty.

"The plan was to lure you to him. I knew when I hired him, I might have to use him to get to you. But you made my job so much easier. You found him all by yourself."

“He works for you,” Sirius was still trying to catch up. He was aeons behind what Regulus was saying. Everything was moving slowly, coming out distorted like he was underwater. His brain was pounding against his skull. “He knew this whole time?”

“He doesn’t know anything. I have rules you know. For my employees. One of them is no contact with strangers. He thinks he’s been sneaking around this entire time. Hiding you away someplace where I couldn’t find you.”

It was a torrent, a barrage of words pelting him. Each one shattering down around him with a lethal sting. Regulus was a hurricane, and Sirius was drowning in the storm he created.

“Wait I don’t-I don’t understand. You were just using him? He was a fucking expendable pawn? He has no idea about his role in any of this?”

“Of course this is the shit you’re worried about right now,” Regulus scowled. “I couldn’t plan on the fact that he would fall in love with you. The plan was to tell him I needed him to get close to you, but he did that all by himself. Once I found out, I didn’t stop it because I knew where it was going.”

“You are the worst fucking person, you know that,” Sirius was past all decorum. His voice was wavering and he was on the verge of tears. He couldn’t help it, they were threatening to spill over at any second. “You don’t care about who you hurt, or how. As long as you get your way. You really are their son.”

Regulus began collecting the photographs and putting them back in the envelope, no longer looking at him.

“Barty is already at your hotel collecting your things. You’ll ride with me and I’ll take you back to the house where Remus is. You can have a little fucking reunion. We’ll set the next phase of the plan in motion once you get there. If you try anything fucking funny, he dies. Is that clear?”

Sirius was staring back at him, horrified. He could pepper spray Regulus. Maybe the element of surprise would buy him time to run? Or to call someone? But all it would take is the press of one button for Evan to kill Remus. Sirius couldn’t be responsible for that, he couldn’t risk it, and Regulus knew it.

“Is that fucking clear?”

Sirius nodded slightly. Still in shock. This is what it had to be. Shock. He needed to see Remus. If he could get eyes on Remus then he could reassess, and figure out where to go from there. He could set his own plan in motion of what to do.

“Good. Get in the car.”

Sirius stood with Regulus, his chair screeching on the cement. He eyed Regulus' phone that was gripped tightly in his hand, Evan's contact page glaring back at him.

“Oh, and welcome to the team.”

Chapter End Notes

so off topic but if anyone wants to know, the shot marilyn monroe painting that is talked about in this fic sold yesterday for 195 million dollars at auction! it was sold to larry gagosian and he's going to hell xx

also these next few chapters,,,, keep yalls seatbelts on,,, i beg

Chapter 18: Cutting Ties

Chapter Summary

Friends don't shoot friends.

Chapter Notes

when I tell u all I expected SEVEN people to read this and now it’s at like 20,000 hits,,,,, akjfhkalfja ily all so much u have no idea mwah!!

Tw: Gun Violence (again)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sirius was silent, and he looked so pale Regulus thought he might be sick. He debated whether or not to crack a window, or to tell him to breathe. He did neither.

He was spending the entire car ride back reminding himself to breathe. Things were about to get a whole lot worse before they got better. It was also crucial that Regulus handle this with as much care as possible, any slip-up could lead to mutiny, anarchy, chaos.

He had Barty and Evan on his side, and he was fairly certain of Dorcas as well, considering she had given him the photographs. But Marlene was questionable and so was Peter. Mary and Lily most definitely wouldn’t take kindly to this news; he knew Remus had been spending a lot of time with both of them recently, and then… and then there was James. James who would probably never forgive him for using his best friend as collateral, as a pawn, as Sirius had put it. He had to be careful about this.

“When we get in there, we’re going straight up to the third floor. You’re not to speak to anyone you see. Once we get up there, you’re going to make some phone calls, you’re going to say exactly what I need you to say, and you need to make it believable. I don’t need to tell you what will happen if you stray from these instructions.”

His voice tasted like chalk in his mouth, but it had to be done. This was always a part of the plan.

Sirius didn’t speak. Regulus was keenly aware of the pepper spray that sat in Sirius’ lap. It seemed as if he had forgotten it was there or decided it was futile to try. Regulus was grateful for this, but it also made him extremely apprehensive. Sirius was not one to go down without

a fight, so either Remus Lupin had rendered him completely useless in the span of a few months, or he was biding his time.

“Barty’s already back,” Regulus said out loud to himself as he pulled up behind the other car. He pulled the keys out of the ignition and they rattled loudly.

Sirius was still silent, staring out the window with a clenched jaw. That’s fine, Regulus wasn’t even really talking to him anyway.

“Out, let’s go,” Regulus swung open the door and Sirius followed. “Not a word,” Regulus reminded him walking through the back.

Surprisingly, they didn’t pass anyone on their way up. Regulus suspected Evan or Barty had something to do with that.

He also expected Sirius to make comments about the house. It was very clearly their parents, though Sirius had left before they bought it. He had never seen it, but it was full of memories from their childhood. Portraits and marble busts, old rugs and curtains. He didn’t say a word, which technically, Regulus had asked him not to say anything, but still. It wasn’t like him to actually listen.

He fought the urge to point out the antique lamp Bellatrix had gifted them one year for Christmas, they were seven and eight respectively, and they both laughed so hard they cried at the ugly little thing when they unwrapped it. He wondered if Sirius noticed the rug in the hall that they had used to slide down the stairs at their old house when their parents were gone. He wondered if he ever thought of things like that.

Regulus stopped at the last door at the end of the hallway and knocked twice. He knew this room well. Just a few days ago, he was pulling James in here after class, pinning him against the wall, kissing him with a fervour only secrecy could bring; he blinked quickly. That was all over now.

He heard the lock turn and Barty’s face peaked out at him through the crack in the door before he opened it, ushering both of them inside.

Regulus took a look around as Barty closed the door and locked it behind them. Remus was sitting in the corner of the room in a small wooden chair. His arms were tied behind his back and his feet were tied at the ankles. Regulus had never seen him look so pale, but otherwise, there was hardly any fear on his face, just acceptance.

Evan was standing next to him, leaning against the wall with a bored expression on his face, and blowing bubbles with the pink bubblegum he was chewing. The tip of his gun rested against Remus’ temple loosely. Barty stood with his back to the door and his arms crossed.

“Oh God,” Remus choked when he saw Sirius, “Oh God. Are you going to kill me in front of him? Is this what we were waiting for becau-”

“Hush,” Evan said gruffly, pushing the gun a little harder into his temple, and Remus closed his mouth tightly.

He seemed rather resigned to the fact that he was being held at gunpoint, his only source of panic coming from the sight of Sirius in the room.

Sirius was unable to move, staring at Remus. He looked as if he was in an insurmountable amount of pain at the sight. As if he could be brought to his knees with just the slightest touch. “Remus I-”

“Nothing from you either,” Barty quipped warningly.

They were standing in a diamond formation in the corners of the tiny room. Barty by the door and Regulus across from him by the window. On the other corner were Evan and Remus and across from them stood Sirius.

“Everyone else is in their rooms. They have been since breakfast. Might’ve lied and said it was a direct order from you but we didn’t know how else to get Remus alone and up here without someone seeing,” Evan said quickly.

Regulus gave a nod of acknowledgement before he spoke as levelly as possible. “Sirius is going to do some things for me, and then we can get to the reunion part of this meeting,” He couldn’t look at Sirius at all without feeling sick, so he focused his gaze somewhere just above his head, hoping it wasn't obvious.

“First you’re going to call your boss. You’re going to tell them that you recuse yourself from the case. You tell them that it was too hard or you were too tired or whatever you think is most believable. You tell them you want some time off or you quit. I really don’t care. Then you call your partners and you tell them the same. Tell them you're flying back to London or going on a self-discovery journey whatever it is you have to, to make sure that they don’t come looking for you.”

Sirius was statuesque. Regulus wasn't even sure if could hear him.

“If you warn them, if you tell them the truth, if you try to leave them hints, or clues I’ll-”

“You’ll shoot him, I get it, I get it!” Sirius’ anger tore through the room. He glared at Remus too, obviously angry but not enough to wish him any kind of harm.

So Sirius could hear him after all. Perfect.

Barty seemed to tense at this and placed his hand to the hilt of his gun that was strapped to his side, but a slight shake of Regulus’ head called him off.

“You still have your phone. Put it on speaker.”

Evan's eyebrows shot up as he watched Sirius reach slowly in his pocket. He fumbled with the buttons, his hands shaking violently.

“Sirius I’m so sorry, I’m so sorry please you have to believe me I didn’t-”

Evan pushed the gun into Remus’ temple again and he stopped talking. “If you make a single noise Lupin, I’ll have to pull the trigger.”

Barty cast a warning glance his way.

A voice came through on the other end of the phone line.

‘Sirius?’

‘Alice hi.’

Regulus had to give him credit, he managed to sound relatively fine.

‘Listen. I was calling to ask a favour from you actually.’

‘Sirius,’ a woman sighed on the other end. *‘Do you know what time it is here first of all? And I know about your favours whatever hotel isn’t meeting your room service standards or-’*

‘I want to recuse myself from the case.’

There was a long stretch of silence and Regulus held his breath. He cast a hard glance at Sirius in warning.

‘I don’t understand.’

‘I’m not getting anywhere. We’ve hardly made any progress and-’

‘You were the one who begged me to put you on this case. Multiple times you were in my office, convincing me there was enough evidence to reopen this case against your brother. And now you want out?’

‘It was too much. It’s taking too long. I want out. I want off this case.’

They went back and forth for a minute, arguing with each other.

Sirius sounded slightly panicked now and Regulus felt his heart rate pick up. Sirius couldn’t fuck this up. He couldn’t think about what would happen if Sirius fucked this up.

‘Alice, I’m so sorry I wasted your time, and everyone else's time, but I need to be off this case.’

There was the silence again.

‘Okay. I’m going to ask you one question and you answer me very honestly. Is this because of your parents? I know finding out about their deaths the way you did was hard and I know that you don’t like to talk about it. You need to tell me if that’s what this is about. If this is why you need time off.’

Sirius cast a nervous glance at Regulus.

‘Yes,’ Sirius’ voice cracked. *‘Yes, I think I just need a break from it all.’*

More silence.

'Please, Alice.'

'Alright.' She sighed into the receiver. *'You can have time off. I can't pay you for it if you go over three weeks, but I can save your job for you here when you get back.'*

The woman sounded sharp and slightly annoyed, but also there was an undercurrent of sympathy and love Regulus could tell from her voice.

'Thank you,' Sirius breathed closing his eyes tightly. *'Thank you.'*

'Sirius,' now the woman's voice was piercing. *'Frank and Pandora are still on this case. And they'll be seeing it through…to the very end. Is that clear? No matter what they find.'*

'I wouldn't expect anything less from either of them,' Sirius responded weakly.

'I'd like to call you in a few days after you've had some time to think so we can reassess your situation.'

Sirius cast a quick glance at Regulus who nodded.

'Yes, okay.'

'And call Frank it's better that he hears it from you.'

'Okay.'

'Are you coming back to London,' her voice was now filled with more concern. *'Come stop by when you get here. I'd like to see you. I can make dinner, the chicken that you like.'*

Sirius cast another glance at Regulus who made no move at all.

'Uh, okay, yeah. I'll think about it, Alice.'

He hung up and Remus let in a huge gasp of air.

"Right, this one's been in a dramatic state all day and I've about had it," Evan looked at Regulus.

"Can you blame me? You fucking came into my room, pointed a gun at me and hauled me off here? No one's told me anything! What that fuck was I supposed to do? Remain calm? I thought we were friends Evan," Remus cried, his voice more angry than panicked.

"We are friends. I think you're a nice guy. Real smart in class. This is nothing personal, this is just work," Evan shrugged, trying to explain himself.

"Nothing personal, great. I feel so much better thanks," Remus grumbled. "I hate to break it to you, but friends don't fucking shoot friends."

"I haven't shot you."

“Both of you shut up,” Regulus snapped quickly. He didn’t have time for this. There was a list of things he needed to get through, and quickly.

“Sirius call Frank. That’s your partner. Call him.”

“Yeah and you’re a fucking cop,” Remus piped up again, much to Regulus’ surprise. Apparently fear made him mouthy. “We’re going to talk about that.”

“You don’t even want to know what the fuck we’re going to talk about,” Sirius glared back at him, his eyes blazing. “Nice fucking American accent, you really fooled me.”

Remus flinched.

“I swear to fuck,” Regulus raised his voice slightly. He tried to make it that cold, frosty tone that sent chills through people. Based on Remus’ reaction it worked. He placed his thumb in between his eyebrows and applied pressure to quell the headache threatening to split his skull open. “Sirius.”

“On it,” he grumbled.

‘Hello.’

‘Frank, listen mate, there’s something I need to tell you.’

‘Are you alright? You sound off.'

‘I’m fine, I’m fine’ Sirius let out a nervous laugh. *‘I just thought you should know I, uh, just got off the phone with Alice and I’m recusing myself from the case.’*

Silence. Frank and Alice seemed to have that in common. That long stretch of silence where no words were spoken, but you understood immediately what they were thinking.

‘Sirius, where are you right now?’

‘What?’

Something in Frank’s tone had shifted dramatically, Regulus nodded to Barty who reached for his gun instantly.

‘Are you in your hotel room where are you?’

‘No, no I’m not there, I’m going home. I’m on my way home.’

‘...Are you somewhere you can talk,’ Frank’s voice was low and quick.

That was all Barty needed to put his gun to Sirius’ head.

‘Y-yeah Frank. I’m fine.’ He glanced nervously at Barty.

‘Sirius.’

‘I’m fine. This was all just too much for me. I-I can’t do it anymore. I explained it to Alice; I want a break. She can explain everything to you. I just thought I would call you and let you know. You can pass along the message to Pandora.’

‘Sirius. I know you’re with him right now. Aren’t you?’

‘With who Frank? What are you talking about?’

‘And that means one of two things. Either you’ve lost your fucking mind and you’ve actually decided to switch sides or he’s fucking got you somehow,’ Frank continued on quickly.

Regulus cocked an eyebrow at Sirius, daring him to say anything.

‘If the first, Pandora and I will not hesitate to prosecute you to the full extent of the law. If the second,’ his voice cracked slightly, *‘We’ll find you mate, okay? Don’t worry. We're gonna stop him.’*

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about Frank. Seriously, just talk to your wife. We worked everything out.’

Sirius began to shake, and the line went dead. Barty had reached over and ended the call.

“Well,” Regulus took a deep breath in. “He’s quite good at his job then, isn’t he? I’m impressed. Barty take his phone.”

Barty reached over and took Sirius’ phone, slipping it into his pocket, and then he lowered his gun.

Regulus looked at Remus, “Evan you can drop the gun.”

“Thank God for that, my arm was about to fall off,” Evan sighed, his arm falling heavily to his side with a thunk.

“I’ve got to hand it to you mate, I absolutely cannot believe you had the balls to fuck Regulus’ brother behind his back. And look at you! You’re still sitting here! Breathing and everything,” Barty cracked a wide grin.

Regulus closed his eyes tightly, feeling the waves of anger rush over him. All around him, Regulus could hear the voices.

“B-brother?”

“What you didn’t know? Look at them,” Barty jeered. “Your boyfriend didn’t tell you he had a brother? You’re telling me you didn’t put it together?”

“Are you going to cry, Lupin come on,” Evan cackled. “You can’t cry because then I might stop believing you’re the fucking coolest motherfucker ever.”

“You live dangerously,” Barty added.

“Right on the edge,” Evan agreed.

“Everyone shut up!”

That was Sirius. His hands were on Regulus’ shoulders shaking him violently. His throbbing headache only worsened as his head moved back and forth, his brain bouncing against his skull.

“You. Owe. Everyone. Some. Answers.”

“Take your fucking hands off him or I swear to God, I’ll shoot them right off your wrists.”

Regulus felt Sirius’ hands leave him, and he opened his eyes slowly. Barty had his gun pointed directly at Sirius.

The tension in the room was reaching insurmountable levels.

“You’d really shoot me, Crouch? I remember when you were just a kid, coming back with Regulus from school all-”

“I’d really shoot you. For Regulus? I’d do it in a second. I wouldn’t even hesitate.”

There was no room for doubt. Barty’s voice could rip a man to shreds. Sometimes Regulus forgot for a moment about how dangerous Barty could be, because he was always ready with a joke or down for a laugh, but there was a reason he and Evan were the ones wielding guns. They knew how to induce terror when they needed to.

“Answers,” Regulus nodded, trying not to wince at his headache as he picked the thread of conversation back up. God, he needed to lie down. “Sure. Let’s start at the beginning then, shall we?” He stared down Remus Lupin with all the rage he had in him.

What was it about Remus Lupin? This man sitting, tied in this chair, looking frightened but dignified enough not to cry. Brave enough to be angry. Why did he get to have Sirius? Why did he get to know his kindness and have his loyalty? Why did he have to know James and sink his claws into him too, to be his best friend? Why did he get to have both? His brother and his–James, and James. His brother and James.

It has nothing to do with him, a voice in his head seethed cruelly. *It was always about you.*

“When you first agreed to work for me, I had a list of rules did I not,” Regulus asked icily.

“Yes,” Remus nearly whispered.

“And you were aware of these rules and agreed to them didn’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Regulus stop this, your bloody interrogating him like he’s committed a crime,” Sirius blurted, glowering at him.

Barty let out a laugh and so did Evan.

“Good one Black. A crime. Because he is actually a criminal,” Evan grinned.

“Do you want answers or not Sirius,” Regulus snapped, his frown weighing down his face.

“Yes.”

“Then keep your mouth shut and listen. Why did I have you work at the museum in town?” Regulus turned his attention back to Remus.

“You wanted me to get a lay of the land. To know how a museum operates from the inside. To study it.”

Regulus nodded. “I also hired Marlene to do the same thing, did I not?”

“Yes.”

“I said when we came onto this team that we needed to trust each other. And I meant it. It’s why I grouped you all to do chores, it’s why I demanded we all eat together, and it’s why I trusted both of you to follow the fucking rules when you went to work for a few hours a week. I didn’t watch you, I didn’t monitor you. I let you be.” Regulus' voice was deadly calm. “But him,” Regulus pointed to Sirius sharply. “I never fucking trusted. I had him watched, from the second I knew he was here, following me to America, I had Dorcas watch him.”

Remus’ eyes went wide with understanding as Barty and Evan snickered, pleased to finally be getting the full story.

“The second he showed up at your place of work, the second you walked out of that museum together, I knew,” Regulus continued to watch Remus carefully.

“No that doesn’t make sense because in the library, that night in the library, you-”

“I knew,” Regulus’ mouth twisted upwards in a cruel grin. Regulus tried not to take pleasure in this. It wasn’t something he was proud of, that flicker of satisfaction he felt when he could see that Remus was hurt. Remus had taken what little he had, and Remus had so much, he should consider this a rebalancing of the scales.

“You did all that to torment me,” Remus said weakly.

“You were breaking the rules.” Regulus continued. “I knew and I let you continue to see him. You weren’t sneaking around. You weren’t hiding. Whatever you thought you were getting away with, you failed."

Remus seemed to pale slightly at that, but there was a defiant look in his eye.

“When I hired you, I knew that Sirius would follow me to America. I knew that he would try to meddle in things he shouldn’t. I was going to use you as a buffer. A distraction. A lethal weapon. I was going to lure him to you, tell you who to look out for, what to do. We were going to do it as a team, Remus. But you wanted to deviate from the rules. So I didn’t intervene and these are the consequences, and the plan is still successful.”

“You call this fucking successful,” Remus spit, now looking angrier by the second. “You have one of your runners held up at gunpoint. What are the other’s going to say when they hear about this?”

“They won’t say anything if they know what’s good for them,” Regulus snapped. “Anyway, it had to be this way, unfortunately. This is the price you pay for breaking the rules.”

The room fell into a heavy silence.

Regulus took a deep breath to calm himself. “And now I believe some introductions are in order. This is Remus Lupin, once university student, not biology though. Barista too. Native to England. Not American. He lives here, he’s been here as long as I have, and if you missed it before, he’s a runner.”

Sirius and Remus were staring at each other hopelessly. Both of them seemed to have a million things to say to one another, but Regulus pushed on.

“Sirius. Happens to be my brother. Always loves omitting that fact. That sentiment is mutual. He’s a detective for the Art Crimes division at INTERPOL. He actually spent most of his childhood training for heists. He’s completed quite a few of them too. Before he gave it up,” Regulus glared at him. “So don’t worry Remus, whatever backstory he fed you was always just as fake as yours, I’m sure.”

Regulus looked at the both of them for a moment. “Unless I’m wrong and completely misinterpreting the room here, and you both have been open and honest with each other this entire time?”

Regulus waited, letting the silence settle between all of them. Rubbing salt in the wound was always something his mother did best, apparently, it was an inheritable trait.

“Hm. Didn’t think so.”

“You are such a dick,” Sirius muttered quietly.

“Are you going to kill me?” Remus blurted, casting another glance at Evan.

Regulus hesitated a moment, he was trying to think of the right thing to say. If he said no, he risked Sirius causing an uproar. He lost the fear that seemed to be driving Remus and Sirius both into compliance. If he said yes, he would be lying. He would be forced to go back on his word or follow through with something he couldn't stomach thinking about. “Not if he behaves,” Regulus gestured to Sirius finally. “You’ve been training all these months. I don’t want to kill you because you’re more work for me dead than alive.”

And because James would be destroyed.

Regulus didn't want to be responsible for extinguishing the sun, but no one else needed to know that. "Not that I won't retrain someone if I have to," Regulus glared at him, trying to get his point across.

Remus nodded slowly.

"Continuing with the heist is something that you would like to do," Regulus asked, staring at Remus carefully.

"You would let me?"

"If I show you goodwill I can expect the others to fall in line. Begin mending what you broke," Regulus responded measuredly. *What I broke.*

"Yes," Remus nodded rapidly. "If you'll let me, I will continue with the heist. I promise I can make myself useful."

Regulus knew that was probably the fear speaking. Once Remus had time to sleep, and to think, without a gun aimed at him, he would probably feel differently. But Regulus was nothing if not an opportunist and he nodded.

"Sirius is here to help with the heist-"

"-Against my fucking will," Sirius cut in. "The only reason I'm here, the only thing keeping me here, and compliant, is you," Sirius seethed at Remus. Every word was full of venom.

"Well regardless of how you joined, you're here," Regulus continued as Barty and Evan held back a laugh. "And now we're going to go downstairs and we are going to talk to the others. You two will have time to speak alone later."

Regulus looked back and forth between Remus and Sirius. His tongue felt like lead in his mouth. He was always the force of destruction.

"Remus didn't know Sirius," Regulus blurted quickly. "It's important that you know that. He had no idea about any of this." He wasn't sure why he was saying this, he had made it clear that Remus didn't know, but he just couldn't stop destroying everything, it was catching up to him. He didn't want to destroy everything. He didn't– but it was necessary. Wasn't it? Didn't the ends justify the means? They had to.

"He still lied," Sirius set his jaw, and his gaze hardened. Remus remained quiet.

"If you try to leave, if you try to turn anyone against me or the heist, if you make contact with anyone" Regulus spoke lowly now, trying to add conviction to every single syllable, "there will be a bloodbath. And it'll be your hands that are stained with everyone's blood. Do not doubt me. Do not underestimate me."

Sirius closed his eyes and tilted his face up towards the ceiling, taking in a deep breath before letting it out.

“Okay, everyone downstairs. I want everybody at the kitchen table in five minutes. Evan untie Remus, Barty get the others, Sirius, you’re with me. Down to the kitchen, let’s go.”

There was a level of stifling and catastrophic damage that had taken place in that room. Regulus needed out, he needed air, he needed to lie down and sleep for a few years before he could grapple with all the destruction he’s caused. But of course he couldn’t do that, he just kept pushing everything to the back of his mind, which would account for the pounding headache.

Regulus sat down at one end of the rectangular table and Sirius sat across from him at the other end. Is this the way they were always going to be? Diametrically opposed? Not if Regulus had anything to say about it. What Regulus wills shall be done.

Remus came in next, rubbing at his wrists where he had been tied. He took a seat and seemed to be studying the wood of the table intently with a heavy scowl on his face.

Then James came in. He was wearing a lazy smile on his face, his hair was tousled like he’d been asleep all day, and his glasses were slightly crooked on his face. Regulus’ heart fluttered despite himself, and he had the urge to fix James’ glasses like he’d done so many other times before. For a second he convinced himself that everything was fine.

But upon seeing everyone in the room, James' face fell. He looked back and forth between all three of them, focusing heavily on Sirius at the end of the table before he went pale. “Wait-” his eyes darted nervously to Regulus.

“Have a seat, James.”

Instantly he went over and sat next to Remus, whose resolve seemed to have weakened slightly at the sight and closeness of his friend.

“Remus,” James said lowly. “Regulus has a brother,” he cast his eyes over at Sirius who was eyeing him back coolly.

“Yes, I know,” Remus nodded emphatically. “I know that now.”

“So you’re the auction man,” Sirius spoke. “We have people looking for you as we speak.”

“What,” James’ eyes widened before he looked at Regulus again.

Regulus shook his head, trying to reassure James without having to use words, just as he was about to speak, Dorcas walked in.

She took one look at Sirius and Remus and began speaking frantically. “Remus I’m so sorry. You have to understand it was my job and he promised me that nothing would happen to you. He told me that you’d be fine. That this was always a part of the plan. I-I would never do anything to-”

“Dorcas, please have a seat,” Regulus interrupted her quietly.

Dorcas listened but still continued speaking, “He had me watching him,” she pointed to Sirius. “I didn’t know that you would get so tangled up in all of this. I’m so sorry.”

“Dorcas it’s fine,” Remus spoke and looked at her with such sincerity she stopped her frantic ramblings. “It was my fault. It’s no one else's fault but mine, please stop apologising.”

Regulus was focused on James, whose mind seemed to be moving a hundred miles a minute. He was working through something, and he seemed to be getting increasingly more nervous.

“Who’s this? Is this why we were holed up in our rooms all day? I thought strangers weren’t allowed,” Marlene called sauntering in. She eyed Sirius up and down and then looked at Regulus. “Oh my God are you two related?”

Remus sank down lower in his seat, as Marlene plopped down next to Dorcas.

“Everything will be explained once everyone gets down here,” Regulus said shortly.

“Nice hair,” Marlene nodded to Sirius.

“Are you a criminal,” Sirius asked blithely. Oh, so now he wanted to speak.

“Are you,” Marlene shot back.

James had begun bouncing his leg. Regulus could tell by the way he was moving just slightly. He had a habit of bouncing his leg when he was nervous. Regulus had been telling him to work on it; that it was an easy indication of unease. He couldn’t wear his anxieties out in public like that, people would prey upon that weakness, but evidently, James hadn’t been working on it.

“What is this?” Mary called, taking an empty seat. Peter followed in behind her and sat down without a word.

“This is a part of the plan,” Regulus said calmly.

“So glad to be a bullet point in your long list of things you get to cross off,” Sirius glared, but Regulus ignored him.

Lily came in next, also eyeing Sirius up and down. She seemed more suspicious than anything but didn't say a word either.

Lastly, Barty and Evan came in, taking the two empty seats next to each other.

“What’s with the guns,” Marlene questioned, her eyebrows furrowing at Barty and Evan.

Everyone began glancing back and forth from Sirius to Regulus nervously.

“Everyone, this is Sirius Black. My brother,” Regulus spat the last part out a bit uncomfortably. Maybe there would be a day when he could say it, and it would feel right again.

Everyone's heads turned to stare at Sirius and James made a small noise that caused Regulus to look at him with slight concern.

Barty and Evan were taking too much enjoyment out of everyone's reactions. Peter looked like he was going to be sick any second.

"He's going to be helping us with the heist."

"I've actually been taken captive. I'm a hostage and I'm being forced to work on the heist," Sirius seethed through his teeth.

"Why don't you tell him how you were taken captive then, Black," Barty smirked.

Remus hid his face in his hands and Sirius glared daggers at Barty.

But ultimately it was Regulus who did all the explaining. Well most of it anyway. He watched everyone's mixed reactions of surprise and shock, panic and confusion as he recounted as calmly as possible the events that led to Sirius sitting at the table with all of them.

"Wait, you knew the entire time that Remus was seeing your brother," James said softly.

Regulus had to fight every fibre in him that was calling out for him to apologise. "Yes." He looked at James, pathetically, he was pleading with him to try to understand.

"And you let them fall in love so that you could get Sirius here? You managed to weaponize love? Against your own brother?"

James was looking at him like he didn't recognise him, it was making it very difficult for Regulus to breathe.

"He hasn't even gotten to the part where he had Evan hold me at gunpoint," Remus grumbled, jumping in at Regulus' hesitation.

"What?" James said more sharply.

"While you were all in your rooms this morning, I was making peace with death."

Now everyone at the table burst into murmurs. They were all talking over one another. A million questions went by, but Regulus was only looking at James who was staring back at him imploringly, begging him to contradict, begging him to have a reasonable explanation that would clear this all up.

"Would you have shot Remus?" Mary was glaring at Evan. "Really?"

"Gunpoint," Marlene was shaking her head. "I thought we were past that."

"Remus was with Regulus' brother? In secret," Lily was looking at Barty with wide eyes as he nodded enthusiastically. "For months?" Barty was still nodding.

"I was a chess piece, I was a pawn. I was the sacrificial lamb if need be," Remus was saying.

“Oh like you’re such a martyr,” Sirius sneered at him. “You’re a liar and petty criminal who got caught.”

“You lied to Sirius,” Remus snapped sharply. “I wasn’t the only one keeping se-”

“Everyone stop,” Regulus snapped his head away from James’ stare. “When you all accepted this job, you were made aware of the rules. Were they imposing? Of course they were. Were they unreasonable? No. They weren’t. And now you see why following them is important. You signed up to do a job. Many of you signed up to make a fuck ton of money. Some of you signed up for the thrill. You all signed up to participate in the heist. I have no intent to harm Remus, provided Sirius stays in line. Remus is still working on the heist, he is still a part of the team, as are all of you. I want to remind you all that I don’t make any decisions lightly. I understand that you all have questions, I will do my best to answer them, but right now, I need to know that you are all still committed to this plan. One hundred per cent.”

Regulus' eyes danced across the table, glancing at each and every face. This was a critical moment. This would make or break the team.

“I think I would actually like some answers first,” James spoke up, and Regulus’ heart skipped a beat.

Regulus returned his gaze back to James as apathetically as he could.

“Would you have killed him? I-if something didn’t go your way. If Sirius didn’t behave properly as you expected? If he had walked away o-or called for help? Would you really have done it?”

No, he wanted to shout. *No, I wouldn’t have. I couldn’t have done that to you. I wouldn’t do that to you.*

Regulus looked at Sirius who was eyeing him carefully. If he said no, there would be nothing stopping Sirius from mutiny. He would unravel the team so quickly that they’d be done by the end of the week.

“Everything I do, I do out of necessity,” Regulus tried to keep his calm. “I do everything out of necessity.” It sounded more strained than he would’ve liked.

“So are we just expendable then? Except for Barty and Evan? You can just kill us whenever you’d like,” Mary snapped, her eyes blazing. Regulus had the thought that maybe Mary should also be someone to carry a gun; she certainly knew how to induce terror just as well as Barty.

“Half of you had guns pointed at you in your interview with me. Whatever gave you the notion that you weren’t expendable?”

It was harsh. It was too harsh maybe, but Regulus just didn’t know when to stop himself. And then he made the terrible mistake of looking over at James. Perhaps he would have to be responsible for extinguishing the sun after all.

“Look, I hired you because I am confident that you all are the best people for this heist. This is a job. I promised you wealth beyond your imagination if you could do your job. Following the rules is part of your job. Barty and Evan were doing their jobs. It can be hard to remember in an environment like this, that this is work first, any and everything else is secondary. I’m sorry that the wake-up call was as harsh as it was, but now you all have been reminded.” Regulus looked around the table again, careful to avoid James. “Now, I need to know if you’re in or out.”

“If we say we’re out are we going to be killed,” Mary asked, quieter this time.

Regulus shook his head. “No, but I won’t be able to let you leave until after the heist is over and the rest of us are out of the country. Does that seem fair?”

Mary contemplated this for a moment before nodding slowly.

“Well you can count me and Evan in,” Barty grinned, clapping Evan on the back. “We’re always down for keeping the trio together.”

Evan nodded quickly.

Everyone else was silent. Regulus stared at each of them critically. “Remus is still working on the heist. We had a little chat before you all were called down here. He’s already agreed to keep working.”

All pairs of eyes turned to Remus and he gave a small nod of acknowledgement; verification of the truth.

“I’m in too,” Peter said quickly after that. It was the first time he had spoken throughout the entire meeting.

“Yeah me too,” Dorcas nodded.

Thank fucking God, Regulus did his best to remain neutral. This is how he needed things to go. This is how things were supposed to go.

“Well fuck, if she’s in, then so am I,” Marlene sighed.

James gave Marlene a look that Regulus couldn’t quite interpret.

“What,” Marlene scoffed back at him. “I agreed to do this job long before I knew any of you. Plus, I want the money to buy an electric guitar. I don’t know how to play, but I’ve always wanted to learn. I just could never justify spending so much money on an instrument that I might not even be good at, but after the heist that won’t really matter now will it? It’s going to be hot pink and I want custom flames on it.”

"Not at all the time Marls," Lily murmured.

“You’re selling Remus out for a hot pink electric guitar,” Mary glared at her.

“It’s not selling him out,” Marlene shot back defensively. “He’s still on the team! He broke the rules and so Regulus had to shake him up a little. Point a gun at him. Scare him back into remembering what we’re actually doing this for. Relationships weren’t ever allowed. That’s not what we’re here for. Friendships or otherwise. I came to make money at the end of the day. Not friends.”

Thank fuck for Marlene fucking McKinnon.

“Oh. Is that so,” Dorcas’ voice came out sharp from beside her. “And is that what you’re doing this for, Marlene? A fucking electric guitar?”

“That among other things,” Marlene said through clenched teeth. “You already agreed as well. Leave it.”

“I’m in too. We’ve come too far to not see this through. I won’t let Remus’... indiscretion set us back,” Lily nodded decisively, though she sounded as if she were trying to convince herself.

Now they were just down to James and Mary.

“If Remus stays I stay. But that’s the only reason I’m still here,” James said tersely.

Regulus tried not to think about the implications of what James was trying to say. Instead, he turned his attention to Mary.

“Well if everyone else is in,” she huffed, crossing her arms. “But don’t think I’ll forget about this clearly established hierarchy here.” She pointed to Evan and Barty, “And don’t think I’ll ever consider you two anything but mindless puppets working for him,” she jerked her thumb over to Regulus.

“Spare us the morals, Mary. Honestly, what did you people think you were getting into?” Evan rolled his eyes.

Regulus held in his sigh of relief. He had a team, an intact team. But he knew the hard part would be establishing a semblance of trust between all of them again. Barty and Evan were clearly now outsiders and from the way Marlene and Lily were speaking, it almost sounded like they blamed Remus slightly for the divide. Getting Remus to do anything now might also prove incredibly difficult; he wasn’t sure what to expect.

“I'm glad to hear this is the way everything has worked out,” Regulus began calmly. “Tomorrow we will take a day off classes. You are free to stop in the classroom anytime, I’ll be there taking questions and concerns.”

“Office hours with Professor Regulus,” Evan grinned.

“I know that the team may feel fractured at the moment, and I know that your trust in me may be wavering, or even shattered, but I intend to fix both before the heist. Lastly, I want to emphasise that Sirius Black, is not your friend. Do not under any circumstances enable him, aid and abet him, or let him get in your head,” Regulus continued, ignoring him.

Sirius scoffed from the other end of the table but didn't dignify anything with a response.

"Your safety and the safety of the other people sitting around you depend on it. Unless you all want to leave here in handcuffs."

Everyone nodded.

"You're all free to go," Regulus said at last, silently hoping that whatever they were going to discuss in private, behind closed doors, amongst one another, wouldn't be his undoing.

No one trusted Barty and Evan so he no longer had eyes and ears on the inside. No one would tell them anything of import for fear they would tell him. Regulus could only pray that they didn't view this as a them versus him situation. They still all had one goal. It was imperative that they remembered that.

Barty and Evan were in charge of Sirius. They took him up to his room, showed him around, and told him the way the operation was organised. Told him when breakfast was, and how classes were structured and caught him up on the routines.

James had left with Remus, practically glued to his side. He didn't expect anything different. Everyone shuffled out quickly, their moods subdued, all of them dead silent.

Regulus sat there, at the kitchen table for a long time. Long after everybody left, long after the sun had set, and long after people stopped filtering back in looking for food or water. Then, when he could bear it no longer, he got up.

Stupidly, half out of habit and half out of hope, Regulus made two cups of tea that night, and though he had never been more tired in his life, he stayed awake as long as he could manage. Maybe James would come in just to yell at him, to ask him why he had done what he did, anything would be better than nothing. Then, the sun peaked above the horizon and the tea went cold and Regulus was alone.

Chapter End Notes

also… there was a lot of anticipation for this chapter and it actually made me very very nervous HA (pls don't get me wrong im so glad you all are so excited about it me being nervous is a me thing akfhdfjaslfjh)

(i hope you all like it, though ik it's not as exciting as the previous chapter SORRY)

Next chapter there will be fights! There will be angst! This is only the beginning!

I cannot thank you all enough for reading, as always <3

Chapter 19: The Jilted Lovers Club

Chapter Summary

More scenes from the fallout.

Chapter Notes

So much is said, so little progress actually happens.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

James had spent the entire night with Remus, which he was more than grateful for. He even slept on the floor, by the door in Remus' room just in case someone tried to come in during the night, and while Remus had tried to assure him that Regulus wouldn't change his mind and send Barty and Evan in there to kill him, and that he was safe, James wouldn't listen. Remus didn't mind, he didn't really want to be alone anyway.

Even though he was incredibly tired, he couldn't sleep and based on the way James tossed and turned on the floor, he suspected James hadn't gotten much sleep either.

Remus was thankful for James. His presence was constant and reassuring and stopped him from feeling alone in the hours after *the incident* , as he liked to refer to it, but as the night drained into the next morning, Remus found himself slightly on edge. James was constantly asking if he was okay and if he needed anything, which was nice the first forty times, but now it was wearing him down. He was also assuring him that everything would work out between him and Sirius, which Remus really, really needed him to drop.

So Remus went up to the third-floor classroom to see Regulus, and James didn't follow.

When he walked in, Regulus was sitting at the front of the room with his elbows propped up on the desk. His head was resting in his hands and his eyes were closed, and Remus was about to turn around and walk out because he was fairly certain Regulus was asleep, but then he let in a deep breath with his eyes still closed and mumbled, "Come in Remus."

"How'd you know it was me," Remus asked, standing awkwardly by the doorway still.

"I can tell by the sound of your footsteps," Regulus sighed opening his eyes. "You can sit down."

Remus shuffled in.

"Anyone else dropped by for office hours," Remus began.

“Mary did. I think everyone else is just enjoying the day off. Why are you here, Lupin?” Regulus eyed him suspiciously.

“Uh,” he let out a wry laugh. “Honestly James is hovering a bit and I knew he wouldn’t follow me up here so.”

Regulus looked away quickly.

“And I wanted to say that, I’m terrified of you, and I hate you, but I think I understand why you did it. The gun thing, not the ruining love for me forever kind of thing and the wanting me dead thing.”

“And you have all these grand revelations over the span of one night?”

Remus shrugged.

“I don’t want you dead. That’s one of the last things I want actually,” Regulus peered at him and Remus was struck with the thought that he appeared earnest. “And Sirius will forgive you. He doesn't like to acknowledge his own culpability in things, but don’t let him make you into the bad guy here. He lied too, just as much as you did.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

Regulus pursed his lips slightly. “Consider it an attempt to rebalance the scales… again. I think I always tip them too far. Not that I condone you and my brother doing anything, even talking, but he’s here now. That’s what I wanted- to have him here.”

Remus sat with his mouth slightly agape, regarding Regulus carefully. He must be extremely sleep deprived, that must be the reason for these divulgements.

“Well, is there anything else?” Regulus spoke sharply, snapping Remus out of his thoughts.

“Just that, I’ll do my job. I’ll cooperate, and you don’t have to worry about me doing anything else…stupid.”

“Are you saying this because you’re afraid I’m going to kill you?”

“I mean what I’m saying, can that be enough?” Remus strained slightly.

“Sure.”

They looked at each other for a moment before Remus stood to leave.

“If you’re going to speak to Sirius, it’s probably best you do it today. It’s not good when you let him sit with things for too long.”

Remus nodded. “Thanks.”

He traipsed down the stairs, oddly, trying to change the way his footsteps sounded.

When he got back to his room, James was there, looking at him expectantly. “Did you see Regulus? How did he seem?”

“Tired,” Remus answered, flopping down on his bed. “I’m going to talk to Sirius tonight.”

“That’s good,” James said mildly, still stung from the last time Remus snapped at him for bringing Sirius up.

They spent the rest of the day with each other, insulated from the rest of the world. Surely the others were talking about the incident, they had to be, but Remus wasn’t ready to talk to them yet. He just wanted to move on, to pretend that none of this had happened as best as possible.

When night rolled around, Remus convinced James to go back to his own room and told him that he was going to talk to Sirius anyway. He had to promise James a million times that he was okay and that he didn’t need him to stay before he finally left and Remus gathered all the resolve he had to knock on Sirius’ door about thirty minutes later.

He opened it quickly.

“Well, I was wondering when you’d show up,” he eyed Remus up and down before opening the door completely to let him in.

Sirius regarded him with a stinging anger.

“Look, if we’re going to have it out, let’s just do it all right now. Scream at me, yell if you have to, let me have it,” Remus sighed.

“You came here to be yelled at?”

“I came here to sort some things out but you look like you want to scream, so go ahead.”

Sirius opened and closed his mouth, his eyebrows furrowed in frustration.

“Alright then, I’ll start,” Remus began. All he really wanted to do was crawl into Sirius’ arms and forget about the rest of the world. He lied, Sirius lied, let that cancel each other out, let them start over. “Hi, I’m Remus Lupin. I was a university student and a barista back in England. I’m really good at latte art and I came here a few months ago to help your brother with an art heist because I couldn’t continue to keep up my studies on a coffee shop salary.”

Sirius scoffed angrily, “You cannot be serious right now.”

“I wasn’t a criminal before, I had no prior convictions, and everything else I told you was true. All of the important stuff like loving David Bowie, and wanting to learn as much as possible about everything, and Spring being my favourite season, and being completely obsessed with you. That was all true," Remus continued.

Sirius seemed to flinch slightly at this.

“Your turn.”

Sirius narrowed his eyes deciding whether or not he wanted to play along with Remus’ horrible idea.

“I’m Sirius Black. I’m not an international consultant, I actually work in the international art crimes division. I’m here investigating my younger brother in connection with a series of smaller crimes committed all across the globe but primarily to stop him from his next crime.”

“Which is why you were at the museum the day you met me,” Remus nodded.

“Yes. But I didn’t want to tell you my real occupation and scare you away considering you worked where you did. I didn’t want you to think that I was investigating you,” Sirius’ voice took on an angrier edge again. “And fucking look at this now. What a fucking idiot I am.”

“Regulus said you used to help on heists, is that true?”

“Of course it is. I was fucking good at it too. But I don’t do that anymore. I made a life for myself that didn’t involve him and he couldn’t fucking stand it. He always has to drag everyone down to his level. It’s the only thing he knows.”

Remus bit his lip, listening carefully as Sirius railed against Regulus.

“And you,” his eyes flashed with fury. “You’re the reason I’m dragged back into this mess. You’re the whole fucking reason I’m right back where I started.”

“That’s not fair,” Remus bit. “I didn’t ask for this! I didn’t ask to be used as collateral. I had no idea that was going to happen. You lied and I lied and as far as I’m concerned our culpability is equal in that department! Any problem you have beyond that should be taken up with Regulus.”

“I am saving your life just by being here.”

“I didn’t fucking ask you to do that though did I?”

“You don’t have to! You made me love you and now I’m trapped.”

Remus’ breath caught in his throat. *Love? Love.* He wasn’t expecting that. Sure, Sirius had said it before, but it was always light-hearted and in a joking manner that Remus could never mistake for being intentional or meaningful. But this? This seemed pretty intentional.

Sirius’ eyes widened too as the realisation of what he said washed over him. “I-I didn’t mean that. You know what I’m trying to say I-I just-”

“Sirius what is going on with us,” Remus interrupted, staring at him intently. He was blushing despite himself, and all of his anger subsided instantly at Sirius’ words.

Sirius was shaking his head rapidly. “No. No, Remus. There is no us, that’s the thing. It was all lies.”

“That’s not true,” Remus whispered, trying to breathe normally. “That’s not true. Not all of it.”

“What kind of relationship would we have if we started it on lies like this? We can’t do this.”

“Then let’s start over,” Remus heard himself pleading. Maybe it was pathetic but he didn’t care. He would be pathetic for Sirius. Even if Sirius had lied to him, it didn’t matter, Remus had already forgiven him for anything he could possibly do the second they first kissed in that museum. “Start over with me, that’s what I’m trying to do here.”

Sirius too no longer seemed angry, just sad. Entirely too sad for Remus’ liking.

“How can we start over when every time I remember why I’m here, forced to participate in something I hate, I think of you? Everything that happens to me from here on out, everything I’m forced to do, is all because of you. Because I met you,” his voice cracked slightly.

Something in Remus’ gaze must have given away how devastated and panicked he felt, because Sirius looked away. He was grasping at scraps, desperately trying to salvage something.

Sirius crossed the room and stood right in front of Remus and despite everything, Remus felt himself calm slightly at their closeness. He was still Sirius, as far as he was concerned, he was still the same person. Fuck the fact that just yesterday he would’ve arrested him if he knew who Remus really was. Fuck the fact that he had lied. He was Sirius Black, and Remus was pretty sure he loved him back.

“I’m sorry I lied to you Remus,” Sirius whispered, and despite himself, Remus’ eyes drifted down to his lips.

He realised quickly that Sirius was going in to kiss him and Remus pulled back at the last second, his heart beating wildly.

“No, Sirius,” he shook his head rapidly.

Truthfully, there is nothing Remus would’ve loved more than for Sirius to kiss him, to make everything better. But Sirius wasn’t trying to kiss him better, he was trying to give up.

“Why?” Sirius sounded desperate, his eyes weighed down with sadness, threatening to spill over.

“Because you’re trying to say goodbye. And I’m not. I’m not going to let you give up like that,” Remus shook his head.

Sirius let out a frustrated sigh. “Remus.”

Remus was desperately trying to keep his resolve. He needed to leave soon before he broke and changed his mind.

“Remus please,” Sirius cried. “I didn’t know the last time I kissed you would be the last time ever. I just-please just-”

“No,” Remus tried to keep himself from trembling at Sirius’ words. “The last time you kissed me isn’t the last time, Sirius. Not if I have anything to say about it,” Remus choked out quickly before he spun on his heel and left quickly, going to bury himself under the shelter of his blankets and pillows for the rest of the evening.

After Remus fled Sirius allowed himself to feel the hole in his chest. He allowed it to expand a little wider and he grabbed his cigarettes sitting on his nightstand and headed outside.

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After Remus had practically kicked him out, James went back to his room and began pacing the floors. If Remus was talking to Sirius, then it was probably best that James goes to see Regulus. It wasn’t good to leave him alone. But what would he say? What was he expecting from Regulus? He wasn’t sure.

Maybe he would just go to let Regulus know that he was hurt. To see him. To see him would be enough. Maybe Regulus would have an explanation, something that he couldn’t say in front of the entire group, but that he could tell James.

He nodded to himself. That must be it. But even as he told himself that, he knew he didn't believe it.

James wasn’t sure what he expected Regulus to say when he came to his room that night, he wasn’t entirely sure that Regulus would speak to him at all, which is why it nearly knocked him over when Regulus opened the door and peered at him with unfiltered surprise as he whispered, “you came back.”

James entered silently as Regulus stood to the side, letting him in. God, he loved this room. He loved everything about it; it was everything that made Regulus, Regulus. But then his heart wrenched slightly, because he supposed it wasn’t. Where in this room was a sign that Regulus would be so cruel to his own brother, that he would hire someone for the sole reason of possibly killing them, that he viewed everyone as expendable? Everyone, including himself.

Regulus was still standing by the door, watching him carefully as if he were a ghost, and he would disappear if he blinked. James quickly realised that Regulus was waiting for him to speak. But James wasn’t sure where to begin.

“Say it’s not true,” his voice cracked when he finally managed to say something. “Say you didn’t mean it. Say you don’t use love against people, that you don’t use it for your own personal gain.”

Regulus closed his eyes as if he was trying to block out James’ voice from reaching him. As hurt as he was and as angry as he was at Regulus, James couldn’t help but notice how beautiful he looked. Even now, when it was evident he had hardly gotten any sleep, it didn’t make him appear weak or faded, but haunted. Haunted in the way that light reflects through the stained glass of empty cathedrals, in the way that the feeling of a dream lingers long after you’ve forgotten what it was about, in the way a strong gust of wind urges you forward on your walk. Ethereal and indescribably weighed down by the world.

“The entire time you knew about Remus. Which explains why you were so upset that day on the aeroplane, that we knew each other. You knew from the beginning what you would do to Remus and my knowing him complicated things,” James stared at him, daring him, pleading him to refute.

“You complicated things,” Regulus whispered softly.

“And then you, let him fall in love just to break his heart.”

“He broke the rules. The punishment fits the crime.”

Now acute anger flashed over James. It didn’t make any sense. Love meant so little to Regulus; it was the heist above all else.

“Then get your gun Regulus,” James said lowly, narrowing his eyes at him.

“What?”

“Get your gun and hold it to my head. Parade me out in front of everyone, go ahead do it. Get Barty and Evan to come in here and drag me out to another kitchen table meeting with everyone so you can go and tell them all the intimate details of our relationship.” Every sentence he spoke was weighted, James wanted them to land.

“James-”

“No! Tell them about what we did that night on the third floor. Or all the times we would meet in the kitchen or outside or in some tiny empty room when no one was looking. Tell them about me coming in here every night. Because we broke the rules too. I broke the rules, so go ahead and put the gun to my temple.”

He wasn’t sure when he had crossed the room and how he came to stand so close to Regulus when he promised himself he would try to stay away but, here he was, blinded enough by anger to let Regulus’ magnetism pull him in.

“Am I not just like everyone else? Am I not just as expendable? Come on Regulus, get your gun.”

Regulus gulped. He had never seen James angry like this. He was a fearsome sight to behold and he was standing so close, Regulus was sure James could hear his heart beating.

“I’m afraid you’d enjoy it too much for it to be considered punishment, James,” Regulus snapped, desperate for the upper hand.

James reeled back at this, but Regulus wasn’t done.

“I saw you, I knew you, that day I interviewed you. You put your life in my hands that day and you *enjoyed* it.”

James had curled his fingers into fists that were balled at his sides and his eyes were blazing.

Yes, Regulus thought. *Hit me, want me, hate me, kiss me, kill me. I don't care as long as you touch me. As long as you don't leave me. I can take it. I can.*

"You-you fucking," now James was stumbling. He was furious, livid, but he couldn't quite articulate why. "You can't do this, Regulus. We broke the rules too! How can you not see the double standard here? Why can't you get that?"

Regulus was a star, James knew that. He always knew that, but he was a star in more ways than one. Now he got to see just how multifaceted he was. He was bright and white-hot, the kind of hot that overwhelms your senses. It was the kind of hot that feels cold at first touch before you realise you've made a mistake and you were actually being burned.

"It's different with us." Regulus was trying to be calm, he was trying to keep his voice level; the last thing he needed was a screaming match, but James was approaching that level quickly.

"How?" James tore out fiercely. "Because it involves you? Because the rules apply to everyone else but not to you. Not when it suits you? You get to walk around doing whatever the fuck you want–"

"You cannot be that stupid. Are you serious," Regulus felt the cool rage rush through his veins. He needed to pull back, he didn't want to hurt James, he needed him to understand. "You and I are on the same team. We're working on the same goddamn heist! There is nothing, *nothing* , you could say to me that would put the rest of this team in danger; that would jeopardise our success. There is nothing that would accidentally slip out that would be this team's undoing."

James closed his mouth and continued to glare defiantly.

"But Remus? He had no fucking idea who Sirius was! He was a detective working on this case. Do you get that? If he said one wrong thing, or made one unassuming comment, we could've all been in fucking jail right now. So excuse me for reminding him of the gravity of that situation."

"You kept letting him see him! You didn't think that it was a big enough threat to stop it when you first found out about it! You wanted that to happen–"

"That's not the point! The point isn't that I knew; the point is that Remus didn't," Regulus was yelling now, he didn't really care who heard now. "If it had been anyone else, James, then I wouldn't have known about it, and everything could've been ruined."

"You did it to be cruel. You did it to one-up your brother, to destroy him for meddling in this heist. You didn't care about Remus. You still don't. You said you would've fucking killed him!" James was shaking his head, his lip curled in disgust, as if he couldn't believe who Regulus was.

So this is how James felt about him. Good to know. "And where do your morals start and end then, oh noble James Potter?"

James blinked rapidly.

“It's okay for you to join a heist, to rob and steal and launder money and sell to drug lords and mafia members– that's well and good for you but then you hop on your moral high horse and look down on me for doing what was necessary? You draw the line because it’s your friend? Because you know him? If it was anyone else, would you even be here right now? If it was Barty or Lily? He knew what would happen if he broke the rules! You all did!”

James was breathing hard, but his anger softened slightly. He was more hurt than anything. All those times Regulus had asked about his friendship with Remus, all those times Remus had managed to sneak by unscathed after meeting Sirius, Regulus knew.

“And now you’re angry. And now you hate me. I told you I’d make you hate me,” Regulus said more quietly.

James ran his fingers through his hair, tugging lightly in distress. “I don’t hate you, Regulus. I don’t. That’s why I’m so angry with you because I think I–,” James let out a sigh. “I don’t hate you. But I hate what you did.”

James was so conflicted he wasn’t sure how to feel. Regulus was making sense, but this was Remus Lupin, he would do anything for Remus and Remus would do anything for him. Surely there was another, better way to go about this entire thing. He knew too that even as Regulus said it, he didn’t hate him. He didn’t think it was possible. But he was hurt. He was allowed to be hurt.

“I didn’t want to hurt you. I never wanted to hurt you, James,” Regulus spilled quickly, as if he could read James’ mind. There was something about the look on his face, the pure sadness that Regulus couldn’t bear, that he had to fix. “That’s the last thing I wanted to do. Just, please, stop looking at me like that. I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

“I know,” James said, nodding softly. “I know you didn't. But you hurt him. And you wanted to.”

Regulus wanted to collapse. He wanted to ball himself up on the floor and scream because it was true. He did want to hurt Remus, and he had. Not hurting James wasn’t enough for him, of course it wasn’t. Not when James was good, so good. He wanted to tell him he wouldn’t have killed Remus, he wanted to fix this, but he couldn’t. He couldn’t risk James telling Remus.

“And what about me,” James continued. “How long until I’m expendable too? How long until I do something that jeopardises the heist?”

“You wouldn’t.”

“You don’t know that. And then am I the same as everyone else? Is there a target on my back too or do I get special treatment because of us? Because of what we…” *are? were?* James struggled to find the right word. “I don’t even know which one would be worse,” he said instead.

“James I would never hurt you. Not like that,” Regulus’ voice was wavering slightly. His resolve was fading by the minute. “But you have to understand that I have a team of people who are counting on me. They trust me to keep them out of jail. They trust me to get them out of this undetected. I won’t apologise for protecting the greater good of the group, and I would do it again.”

James closed his eyes and nodded slowly. “Okay,” he breathed, walking towards the door.

“Okay?”

“Yeah. Okay.” He hated this. He hated that Regulus was making sense. It was as if they were on two uncompromising sides. Logic and feelings. Reason and emotion. The head versus the heart.

“Wait,” Regulus’ voice came out panicked as James put a hand on the doorknob. “Did this… did this help to clarify things? Did you, um, get what you came here for?”

James let out a little laugh, it was sad and dim and not at all like the laugh that Regulus loved so much. “I honestly don’t know what I came here for.”

James turned the doorknob and opened the door.

“Are you going to come back?”

Regulus braced himself for the worst. He needed to know so that he could move on. Well, he wasn’t entirely sure that was possible. Maybe so that he could start the process of pretending like nothing had ever happened. *But he said he doesn’t hate you,* Regulus’ heart snagged. *That has to count for something right?*

He hated himself for asking it. He hated himself for sounding so small, but he needed to know. He had to know.

James took a deep breath in and gave a small nod, “I’ll see you in class tomorrow.” And then he left.

Regulus let out a sigh and sank to the floor at the sound of the door closing. He balled himself up, but he didn’t scream. He just wrapped his arms around his knees and pulled them to his chest. The only one he could ever count on to hold him when he needed it was himself.

—---

James needed air. He walked out of Regulus’ room and made his way outside to the back of the house. It was dark outside and the only light was coming from the moon but James could see a figure standing up against the brick of the house.

He frowned. This was his spot. This is where he went to meet Regulus because it was away from windows and prying eyes, and while he certainly didn’t have a monopoly on the spot, no one else had ever gone out to this side of the house at least that he was aware of.

“What are you doing,” Sirius said as James went to lean up against the side of the wall next to him.

“This is my spot actually,” James countered with a sigh.

Sirius nodded taking a drag of his cigarette. “Good choice.”

“Those are really bad for you, you know,” James said, nodding to the cigarette. “I tell Remus all the time.”

“Yeah well so is hanging out with a bunch of criminals preparing to rob a museum but you don’t hear me telling you how to live your life,” Sirius scoffed.

James shrugged, “Fair enough.”

He glanced over at Sirius and smiled despite himself. He could see why Remus liked him so much. He was exactly Remus’ type. Brooding, a little mysterious, quick with a remark.

“So who are you,” Sirius said after a moment of silence had passed between them.

“Oh, I’m James.”

“Got a last name, James?”

“I do, but I don’t think I should tell you. You have people looking for me.”

Sirius nodded slowly. “We do yeah. You went to an auction a while ago with my brother. Those places have security cameras everywhere. You were glued to his side the whole night, so we knew you were working together.”

James let out an uncomfortable cough, preferring not to think about the night of the auction or the fact that people were out looking for him.

“So what do you do for him?”

“I, uh,” James let out another uncomfortable cough. “I don’t think I’m gonna be telling you that either.”

“Fine,” Sirius shrugged. “Why are you out here? Want to tell me that at least?”

“Needed to clear my head, and I needed the air,” James responded looking pointedly at Sirius’ lit cigarette. “Why are you out here? Thinking about running away already?”

“No, I guess I needed to clear my head too. I can’t run, you know that.”

James nodded.

“Ah fuck, you two gave me a heart attack,” Marlene gasped putting her hand over her heart as Sirius and James turned to look at her. “I thought I heard voices. What are you both doing

out here in the dark? Having a jilted lovers club meeting? Because I think I'm at the wrong one."

"Jilted lovers club," James echoed confusedly.

"Yeah. You and Dorcas and Sirius here are all the jilted ones. Me and Remus and Regulus are the jilters."

"What are you even saying right now Marlene," James shook his head, not up for her antics tonight.

"Remus burned Sirius by lying to him, Regulus burned you by, you know, calling us all expendable and by showing you he wasn't actually a good person, and I burned Dorcas by pretending I only cared about the money," Marlene shrugged leaning up against the wall beside James.

"Wait a fucking second. You're fucking my brother? That's fucking grand isn't it," Sirius started, his voice lethal. James' eyes went wide.

"No," Marlene let out a laugh before James could say anything. "Fuck, you're new so let me catch you up, James had a massive crush on him, but I don't think it's going to work out now."

"Marlene can you shut up," James seethed from beside her. "You shouldn't be saying any of this to him. What is wrong with you?"

She shrugged. "Not like he can do much about it now."

"I would actually not like to be a part of this club or this conversation," Sirius muttered, calming down slightly.

"Where'd you get that?" Marlene nodded to his cigarette that Sirius was putting out against the side of the wall, changing the subject. "Regulus doesn't let us."

"Sounds like him," Sirius snorted. "Barty snuck them in from my hotel when he packed up all my things. I guess he's good for something after all."

"So, you and Remus," Marlene edged, changing the subject again.

"Look, Marlene, if you're gonna hang out with the jilted lovers, you can't bring up the jilters," James groaned, actually wishing she would leave entirely.

"My thoughts exactly," Sirius nodded in agreement.

"Fine," she grumbled. "I'm going in then. Forgive me for trying to meet the new guy and for trying to talk about the giant elephant in the room. See you in class tomorrow." She began walking off, heading inside.

"She's something," Sirius mumbled shaking his head.

“She’s great,” James defended. “Just no filter most of the time.”

“Yeah hot pink guitar girl,” Sirius nodded smiling slightly.

“Yeah,” James smiled too. “That’s Marlene.”

“I take it Dorcas is another person here? Working on the heist?”

“Jesus mate, do you ever put your detective job on hold? Even for like a minute?”

“Oh come on, that one I’ll find out tomorrow at breakfast anyway,” Sirius goaded.

James nodded slowly. “Yeah. Yeah, she is. You can’t tell Regulus about them you know.”

“Are they together?”

James didn’t answer but he felt his heart skip a beat. Marlene and her fucking mouth. How she could treat Sirius as any other member of the heist so quickly was absurd to James.

“I won’t tell my brother. Honestly,” Sirius sighed. “Anything that doesn’t go according to his plan is a win for me.”

When James still didn’t answer, Sirius laid his head back against the wall. “So, a massive crush on my brother then?”

James was going to kill Marlene McKinnon.

“Massive crush on Remus then? He’s my best friend, you know. We’ve known each other for years,” James responded pointedly.

Sirius’ face darkened slightly. “Touché. No talking about the jilters.”

“No talking about the jilters.”

They stood there for a little while in silence, both lost in their own thoughts.

Eventually, James got decidedly cold and went back inside. He called out a good night as Sirius lit another cigarette.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was actually so hard to write :/ Ugh!

Chapter 20: Borrowed Bravery

Chapter Summary

sighs the Black Brothers, you know.

Chapter Notes

I cried while writing this but I think it's just because I'm overly emotional

Also this chapter is short; next chapter will be long (at least that is the plan)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sirius began his act of rebellion the next morning in the only way he knew how, and Regulus had no time for it–not that he wasn't expecting it.

It started at breakfast; Regulus had asked him to pass the jam which was sitting right by him and Sirius acted as if he didn't hear. Regulus let it go because he was honestly surprised that Sirius had even come down at all.

Everyone was quiet that morning with only brief murmurs of conversation. The clinking of silverware against the plates was more noticeable than anything else as Mary and Lily cast suspicious glances at Sirius every few seconds. Peter tried to be amicable and smiled as Sirius sat down, but otherwise, he wasn't looking in his direction at all. The tension between Sirius and Remus was palpable as well, and even Evan had managed to stay awake through this meal, looking tired but on edge.

The only one who didn't appear to have a problem was Marlene who was working her way through breakfast and trying to chat with Peter happily.

Then in class, Regulus expected Sirius to sit in the back of the room with his arms folded making snarky comments, but instead, he decided to sit himself down right next to James. What was even worse was that Sirius would occasionally lean over and whisper something to him and that James would respond in a hushed tone. The thing is, James didn't look bothered at all.

Regulus was getting increasingly distracted and annoyed by the two of them. After lunch when the antics continued he instinctively looked over to Remus whose expression could've mirrored Regulus' exactly. How the fuck did they appear to be getting on so well?

Sirius' rebellion continued. He flat-out ignored Regulus and continued to ask questions of everyone else. Probing questions, detective questions, incriminating questions. But if that was as far as his dissent went, Regulus couldn't be too angry, but he could be nervous. Nervous that Sirius wasn't acting out more, that he wasn't actively sleeping in, walking out of class, refusing to come to meals. It could be that he was lying in wait, that he wanted to lure everyone into a false sense of security before he attacked; it could be that he had something in the works already that Regulus couldn't see; it could also be that he had simply given up. He had accepted the inevitability of everything the moment Regulus placed those photos down in front of him.

That night, Regulus went back to his room. He tried to read, he tried to get his mind to calm down enough to focus but he couldn't. His eyes couldn't register the words on the page, and his brain couldn't process the paragraphs; he was just mindlessly turning through the pages without reading a thing.

Exasperatedly, he flung his book to the side of his bed and stared at the ceiling. He wasn't tired enough to sleep, but he had nothing to do. Just as he was about to get up and go for a walk he heard a knock on his door.

It would be embarrassing to admit how fast he scrambled up to open it, and when he did, there was James. He came back. Regulus stood to the side to let him in, but James shook his head quickly.

"You're not coming in?" He asked, blinking in confusion. "I can make tea."

James shook his head again, a look of sorrow in his eyes.

"Are we going somewhere?"

"No," James sighed sadly. "I guess I just wanted to come," James bit his lip and looked away nervously. He took a deep breath and tried again. "I just wanted to say that I'm here, and that I'll come back tomorrow, but that I'm still upset. With, you know, everything."

"Oh."

"But I told you I wouldn't leave and I meant it. I'm gonna knock, I'm gonna say hello– show you that I'm still here and tell you that I'm coming back, but that's all I can really manage right now," James continued.

He's here. He's here. He's here. Regulus' heart cried with every beat. But then his mind took over. The cold reasoning of logic slipped in, because why else would James be here if it wasn't out of pity?

"Are you here because you feel bad for me," his voice came out sharp.

"What?"

"Are you here because you feel bad? Because I won't be your charity case, trust me. I'm fine on my own. I don't need you here if you don't want to be here. I'm not like-I'm not some

wounded animal."

"Regulus no. No," James' eyes were wide, as he tried to stop that train of thought. "I'm here because I want to be here. I'm here because I want to see you, even when I know I shouldn't." James' voice got quieter. "Not everything is about you, Regulus. Some things are about me, too."

Regulus let the weight of those words settle into him. "And so that's what this is about? It's about you?"

James seemed to think for a moment. "Partially. And it's about you a little too. It's not all about you, but some of it is. It's about us."

Us.

Us implied togetherness. It implied belonging.

"Us," Regulus whispered. He couldn't help himself. He couldn't help needing to say it, to feel it, to commit to memory.

James stared at him, and for a moment Regulus was overcome with the wonderful feeling that he was going to kiss him.

"I'm still mad at you, you know," he whispered. But this time his voice came out more uncertain. More like he was trying to convince himself.

"James, it's been so long," Regulus said softly. He wasn't even sure what he was saying. He didn't know if this was a plea, a beg, a pathetic excuse. He just knew that it was right. It felt true.

"It's been three days."

"I know," Regulus choked out.

James stared at him with wide brown eyes. Regulus never wanted him to leave.

"Yeah," James sighed, sounding strained. "Yeah me too."

Regulus wanted to ask him to come in again, just to see if he would change his mind, but he'd be too embarrassed if he said no.

"I'm gonna go," James spoke at last. "But I'm coming back tomorrow. If that's alright?"

Regulus nodded before he could even think of words to say and James hesitated slightly before he walked away.

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Sirius had to remind himself that he was here against his will. There were a few times in which that was getting harder to remember.

As the days continued to go by, Sirius found himself interested in the classes. They were exhilarating. They were embedded with nostalgia from childhood, but more streamlined and efficient. Regulus certainly knew what he was doing, and he wasn't tyrannical and brutal like Orion had been. He was methodical and calm. Orion aimed for capable and quick; Regulus aimed for understanding and perfection.

There were a few times when Sirius had to stop himself from actually speaking up in class, from asking Regulus why he was doing something a particular way, or from suggesting things that he thought might help.

It was happening, slowly but surely, he was being pulled in by the tide, by the current of his brother and the heist, and while he was trying his best to paddle his legs and swim against it, he found himself a little further from shore every day.

He would come down for meals, and help clean, and he told himself it was because he was doing it for Remus. He was doing it for the other's safety, but one thing he couldn't file under that excuse was the excitement he felt for classes every day. That, he tried to tell himself, was because he was a good detective, and he was doing his job. Every day he sat in class he could learn details about the heist that he could use. How he would be able to use them was less clear so he just tried not to think too hard about it.

He was also, *slightly* , enjoying the process of getting to know everyone else in the house. James was the easiest to get along with, and he liked him despite himself. Whether or not James liked him was harder to tell. He certainly didn't trust him, and tried to keep the conversation light, unsure of what he knew and didn't. But even then, Sirius enjoyed talking to him. However, sometimes, James would look at him and something would change in his expression; it would darken slightly like he had just remembered something unsavoury and would get rather short with him. Perhaps it was because he remembered he wasn't supposed to like Sirius, because he was technically still the enemy.

Marlene was the most amicable. Sirius could relate to her unrelenting but easy nature. She was loud and eager to talk and didn't mind telling Sirius things other people baulked at. It's how he learned Peter was a doctor and how Barty hid his weed under the loose floorboard in Evans' room, but she still didn't know how he managed to sneak it in here, it's how he knew that Marlene was always a thief, she just specialised in jewellery before. She also didn't really care if he had much to contribute to the conversation, but her honesty made him laugh and it made him more open about things as well. He told her stories about Frank and Alice and dinners at their home and about Pandora and her obscure knowledge of rocks and minerals.

He still hated Barty and Evan. He hated that they knew him from his old life- that there was a brief time when Sirius' and their worlds were the same. He hated that they had that knowledge and that they could use it if they wanted. He hated that they were no longer little kids but that they had become hardened to the world. He hated that they stayed with Regulus when he didn't and he hated that they knew his brother better than he did.

Peter and Dorcas were nice. They would at least talk to him in passing. Peter was actually extremely funny, and Sirius only learned that by sitting close enough to him to hear the comments he made under his breath. Dorcas was reserved, but she dressed the best out of any

of them, and Sirius could appreciate someone with a good sense of style, even if they were a criminal.

Mary and Lily both kept to themselves mostly and still hardly ever even looked at Sirius. Both of them seemed to be inseparable, and they were always off working in their art studio, but during one class they gave an update on their works and Sirius couldn't help but be in awe. They were incredible. He had never seen replicated fake paintings like theirs.

And then there was Remus. Remus who had promised not to give up on them. Remus who had said that they would kiss again, and God, Sirius hoped he meant it. Sirius hoped he would never give up on them. And maybe that wasn't fair, because as long as Remus was trying, Sirius didn't have to. Sirius was allowed to be flippant and dismissive. They had both lied, Remus was right, but Sirius couldn't pretend to start over like Remus wanted. Not when he was the entire reason his life was completely altered.

The days continued to pass, and Sirius found himself falling into the ease of routine when after dinner one night, Regulus asked him to stay behind.

Regulus hardly spoke to him. He had tried in the beginning, but Sirius was too angry to even acknowledge his existence. As mad as Sirius was at him as well, he had to give him credit. In class, Regulus was never condescending or patronising towards him. He didn't even treat Sirius like the rest of them, there was always a slight note of deference, a slight acknowledgement that Sirius knew what he was doing, even though Regulus' knowledge of these things had long ago surpassed his own.

Sirius waited as everyone slowly left. watching as they cast nervous glances between the two brothers. When James had finally left, Regulus stood from the table.

"Follow me," he said, already walking away.

Sirius trailed behind him, up the stairs and to a room on the third floor. It was different from all the other rooms, the door handle was brass instead of silver and it had a lock on it. Regulus reached into his pocket and pulled out a key.

Whatever was behind this door was bound to be important. Sirius eyed the lock carefully in an attempt to study it, he thought he could easily pick it- if need be.

"Don't even think about it," Regulus responded flatly making Sirius jump slightly. "Anything of value will be removed from the room before you can even think about coming back."

"How do you fucking do that," Sirius shook his head. "You're bloody terrifying."

Regulus swung open the door and Sirius followed him in. He looked around in astonishment. Blueprints, three-dimensional modelings, large-scale copies of paintings, notes taken meticulously in both Orion's and Regulus' handwriting, and museum interior photographs with measurements littered the walls and tables in the room. This was the holy grail. This was the heist.

“As you know,” Regulus began to speak as Sirius continued to look around. “Father always had plans for *the heist* . The one that would live in infamy. The one that would shake the foundations of the art world. He was preparing us for that chance, for that heist, but when you…left, and father was too ill to do it himself, things began to fall apart.”

Sirius traced the blueprints with his fingers, he tried to commit this all to his memory, but there was too much. Entirely too much. Every little thing documented with meticulous care.

“I’ve modified his plans a great deal since he passed. To even call them his plans anymore is generous, it’s the shell of his idea. They’re my plans. And they can be ours,” Regulus said this part more carefully but still authoritatively.

“Regulus why am I here,” Sirius heard himself say. He was ashamed to admit that part of him was enthralled by what he was seeing. He had never seen something so wonderfully cohesive, something so destined for success.

“I’m good. I’m better than good, I’m damn near perfect, but,” Regulus paused slightly, as if it pained him to say it. “But nobody has the eye for working out mistakes like you. You’ve always looked at things differently, a bit irrationally, but maybe that’s what I need. I’ve been staring at these plans for so long, there’s a possibility there’s something I’m missing, something I’m not seeing.”

“And I’m the one you picked to help with this,” Sirius scoffed disbelievingly.

“You’re the only one who can. You’re the only one who’s capable.”

God, it’s been so long since Sirius had done this. Since he’d been challenged, and forced to use this side of him, the skills that laid dormant for so long. With his job, there had been a few fleeting cases of excitement, but never anything particularly difficult or challenging. Nothing that really allowed Sirius to practise what he was best at. Nothing like this. But he couldn’t give in like that, it couldn’t be so easy.

“So this is why you did all of this then,” his voice came out angry. He was proud of the way it echoed in the room. “This is why you broke into my hotel and paralyzed me and destroyed the one solid relationship I had? So that you could use me as a means to achieve your heist? So that you could reach the peak of perfection?”

Regulus’ eyes flashed with something that Sirius could almost mistake for pain before they narrowed into an apathetic glare.

“You fucking kidnapped me Regulus! And now you’re fucking Stockholm Syndroming me into wanting to help,” Sirius continued, throwing up his hands.

“I see you in class Sirius,” Regulus’ voice was calm. “I know why you’re there, and that you’re excited. I can see when you want to ask questions. I can tell when you want to say something. And I wish you would. I wish I could ask you questions. I am asking you now. You and I were made to do this. You know it.”

“No Regulus! I got out! I got out of this,” Sirius countered, feeling his anger slowly being replaced with despair. It was hard trying to be angry at Regulus when he was so calm like this, when he was asking for Sirius’ help. He was reminded of when they were young, of when he was an older brother and it was his job to help Regulus. “And you dragged me back here. You undid so many years of hard work to put me right back where I started! Why would you do that to me? You knew how bad I wanted out of this and you just didn’t care. You did it to help with the heist?”

“I did it because I missed you.”

Regulus’ voice came out small, he was looking at the floor as he said it. He couldn’t even look at Sirius, which was good because if he had, he would’ve seen Sirius three shades paler. Regulus’ words had knocked the wind out of him.

“I did it because you just left. And I missed you and I know it was selfish and I know you hate me but I don’t care anymore because I,” Regulus’ voice cracked.

Oh fuck. If Regulus cried, Sirius was fairly certain he would too. “Re-”

“No! Shut up,” Regulus strained. “I’m fucking trying to tell you something. I have a finite source of this kind of bravery. I’m actually borrowing it from someone right now, so just listen before it runs out!”

Sirius stopped talking and tried to focus on Regulus. The room felt as if it was spinning slightly. Everything had shifted so quickly, he needed to take a minute to anchor himself to something.

“I don’t care anymore because I remember what it feels like to have an older brother. And, I just fucking– I need an older brother, and I can no longer pretend like I don’t.”

Sirius needed to sit down. He needed to do something, because he was going to collapse, he was sure of it. He took a few steps back until he hit the wall, and he leaned up against it for support.

“I’m sorry I used the heist to try to tell you all of this, but Sirius, this is the only fucking thing I know,” Regulus gestured to the room around him. “This is all I am. I’m sorry I’m not like you... I’m sorry this is all I am.”

His bottom lip was trembling and oh God, he was a kid again. He was his baby brother who believed in monsters under the bed and who whispered his secrets to his stuffed animals and who cried on his birthday every year.

“Why are you telling me this now,” Sirius tried to speak calmly but it came out watery.

Regulus closed his eyes for a moment. “I have a friend,” he whispered. “They used to come by every night for tea, but um,” Regulus’ voice came out watery too. “But I ruined it. And they were really mad at me for a while, and they still are. But last night, for the first time, in a long time, they came by and asked for some tea… and I asked about you.”

Sirius looked up at the ceiling trying to blink the tears out of his eyes. He couldn't stand to hear Regulus sound like this; so sad, so small. He didn't know Regulus was still capable of it.

"I didn't know if this was going to be the last time we ever had tea together, and there were so many things we could've talked about, but I talked about you. And they told me to be honest with you; to tell you how I *feel* ." Regulus let in a gasp of air before continuing. "I said I didn't think I was brave enough to do that, and they told me that was okay. I could borrow some of their bravery if I needed. So that's what I'm doing. Because I don't know what else to do."

Regulus had his back turned to him now, as if by doing that he could pretend Sirius wasn't there. He could make him disappear.

"I miss you too," Sirius gasped out, trying to form a semblance of a thought. "You know? All the time. I don't hate you."

"You're actively trying to put me in jail," Regulus let out a wet laugh, that was more like a sob, and fuck it, Sirius was crying because this was the last thing he expected. This was the last thing he thought Regulus would say.

"Because I'm scared for you. Because I want you safe. Because I love you so much that I would rather do that than lose you. And I didn't want to leave you there Regulus but you didn't want to go, and I didn't know what to do. I was still a kid." Sirius' thoughts were erratic. He was trying to answer everything Regulus had laid out against him, or in front of him. He was doing a piss poor job at it.

"I know."

"But I miss you. And I miss being your brother. You know, I hate Barty and Evan sometimes because they know so much about you. I didn't know you didn't like eggs anymore. You used to like them when we were young, but Barty said something about you refusing to eat them and I just– those are the things I should know. I'm sorry Reg, I'm so sorry," Sirius choked out.

"For what?"

"All of it, everything, I don't know."

Sirius could tell by the sound of Regulus' voice that he was crying too, but when he turned around, he wasn't prepared for the sight of Regulus actually crying. Regulus never cried hardly ever. Sirius was struck by the notion that he had the impact to hurt Regulus Black. He mattered enough to Regulus, to break through all that apathy he projected. He mattered enough to hurt. And what a fucking terrifying but relieving thing to know at the same time. Because it wasn't just him who felt this way. It wasn't just him who was trying to pretend that none of it mattered. It wasn't just him pretending and hurting alone.

"I'm sorry for all of it too," Regulus' voice trembled.

They were in a tumultuous area now. Both of them were rocking in the waves. They missed each other but where did that leave them? A little bit better off than before. A little bit better off than when they both thought they hated each other, but it didn't fix anything. They had both hurt each other. They were still damaged goods. They could both be sorry, but sorry didn't change the past. It didn't really change anything... did it? Didn't it?

Sirius had the urge to go over and hug him. He wasn't sure what to do, but Regulus looked like he could use a hug. Sirius could use one himself, but Regulus never took kindly to affection like that so he stayed still. He was so unsure of himself, so unsure of Regulus.

Both of them were quiet for a long time and their tears subsided. There was a lot left they needed to talk about, none of it would be pleasant or easy to say, and Sirius would rather talk about it all now and get it all out on the table, but they both needed a momentary break so he nodded to the old oak desk that was sitting in the room instead.

"Remember that day in the summer when Walburga and Orion were out? They wouldn't let us paint our nails, but I had gone down to the store and nicked a bottle of black nail varnish anyway. You were the one who suggested I paint my toenails instead of my fingers because I'd be wearing shoes, so they'd never know. You helped me paint them," Sirius let out a smile recalling that memory. "Right there. And I was stupid and spilt half the bottle of varnish on the desk. I was freaking out, because Orion was going to kill me and you just went and got a hairdryer and some sandpaper and some distilled alcohol and took the stain right off. Like it was nothing. Do you remember that?"

Sirius thought it was a nice memory. He thought it was a good one, where they were both happy and breaking the rules, and having fun. So he was surprised when he looked away from the desk to see that Regulus had started crying again.

"Yeah, I remember that," Regulus breathed, barely above a whisper. His voice cracked. "I really do."

Chapter End Notes

there's not too many like,,, sad chapters left for right now,, LIKE ,,, THINGS WILL GET BETTER SOON I PROMISE this just feels like a slight emotional break through idk

anyWAZE i love you all! have a good day/night :)) <3

Chapter 21: Progress, Picnics, and Poetry

Chapter Summary

life is getting better!

Chapter Notes

thought this chapter was coming out tomorrow but my flight was canceled so here it is.

tw: discussions of gun violence (i think it's mentioned once maybe twice but still)
I also want to say that coming off of the horrible mass shootings and violence in Buffalo, New York and in California the last few days have made even light discussion of violence in this chapter pretty difficult for me to write. I live in America, and gun violence is something that I feel everyone has either experienced personally or by proxy. It is devastating to witness the unnecessary loss of life due to large scale government inaction. And while this is a fictional story, it is still heavy all the same. I won't speak on this anymore here, but this is a reminder to be kind to yourselves, read at your own risk, and im sending love always. <33

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Regulus wasn't prepared for the feeling of relief that came with following James' advice. It was exhausting, but something had lifted from his chest slightly too. He was sitting next to Sirius on the floor, both of their backs were against the old wooden desk. It was the closest they had been in a long time.

They had been there a while, neither of them were speaking but neither of them wanted to leave. It was too precarious to leave like this. Regulus was embarrassed that he had cried like he did. He was even more embarrassed that he felt as if he could cry again at any moment. He hadn't felt this breakable in a long time, maybe ever. The only thing that was keeping him here, that was keeping him from running away and hiding, was the idea that James believed in him. Which was also pathetic and made him want to hide slightly. The idea that James thought he could be brave. He wanted to prove him right, he wanted to do something right, to show James that he could.

"Can we um, talk about Remus?" Sirius broke the silence with a hoarse voice.

"Well, no one's stopping you," Regulus snapped defensively. *Fuck* . This isn't the way he was supposed to go about this. Getting defensive would only make Sirius angry again, which is what he was trying to avoid. "Yeah, we can talk about him," Regulus corrected more softly.

Of course Sirius would want to talk about Remus. Regulus was just scared of what he would say, of what they both would say.

“You really hurt me Regulus. I mean Remus was one of the best things to happen to me and I was really happy with him,” Sirius began. It sounded like he was struggling through his thoughts, every word coming out reluctantly. “I mean I was thinking about moving here to be with him and-”

“What?” Now Regulus’ voice was cold and sharp with shock. Of course this didn’t change anything, he felt the ice flood his veins. This is exactly why he didn't want to talk about Remus. He took a few breaths trying not to cry again, trying not to scream.

Sirius had turned to look at him now with trepidation. He had been trying to tread lightly, but clearly, he had failed.

“Why the fuck would you say that to me, Sirius? Why the fuck would you even think you could say something like that to me?” Regulus’ voice was verging on erratic.

“Say what? The truth?” Sirius countered.

Regulus scrambled to get away from him, and he was back on his feet in an instant. His words were hitting him like bricks, all piling on top of one another with a relentless need to crush. Sirius leaving for America without so much as a word? Sirius relocating and uprooting his entire life for a total stranger? Regulus shook his head in an attempt to think clearly.

To leave or to stay.

He could run out now, leave it at this. They had a moment, and the moment had passed. He could yell at Sirius to get the fuck out so Regulus could be alone to think for a moment, so he could be alone to hurt for a moment.

Tell him how you feel, James’ voice echoed around and around in his head. *Tell him how you feel.*

And how did Regulus feel? Bruised. Unwanted. Not worth it.

“Regulus,” Sirius’ voice brought him back.

“No, fuck you. Fuck you.”

“Fuck you! Why are you looking at me like that?” Now Sirius was up on his feet. “Why are you looking at me like you're the hurt one? I’m the one you hurt! I'm not the bad guy here!”

Some of the papers tacked to the wall fluttered in the burst of wind from Sirius' start. It was getting unbearable again. Regulus was feeling too fragile to know what to do.

“No, you are though! You hurt me too!” So much for keeping calm. “You barely fucking knew him!”

“So what?”

“So why is he enough?” Regulus was yelling now. He hoped the rest of the house couldn’t hear them. “What is it about him, Sirius? I spent my whole fucking life trying to be enough. Enough for mum and dad, enough for you to stay, and then when you left, I tried to be enough for you to come back too. Enough for you to remember.”

Sirius had reeled back like he was being struck.

“B-but Remus comes along and you’re ready to drop everything for him. Move to fucking America for him? Abandon your morals and your high horse to keep him safe? Why does he get to be enough for you, when I’m not?”

Sirius was staring at him silently. Half bewildered and tremendously sad.

James. Regulus thought. *James, you better be proud of me, because I’ve never been this terrified before.* He could hear his heartbeat roaring in his ears.

“Regulus you were enough. You were enough for me to base my career off of. You were enough for me to follow you through different countries and across oceans. You were enough for me to still get in your car after you paralyzed me.”

Regulus flinched slightly at this.

“Everything I have ever done has been for you. Remus was the first thing I did for me.”

Regulus looked around the room everywhere except for Sirius. Maybe they should've left things while they were both ahead.

“That’s a lie. You left for you too. You didn’t do that for me,” Regulus sneered. He knew it would sting Sirius, and he wanted it too. He wanted it to sting as much as he was stung when Sirius told him he contemplated moving to America for a fucking stranger.

It was easier to be angry at Sirius. Regulus had been angry at Sirius for so long that he wasn’t sure what to do without it. How to move past it. The anger was one of the only things he took with him from place to place. It stayed with him, it grew with him. It was easier to be angry.

“I did it hoping you would follow me,” Sirius sighed, running his hands through his hair. He was looking at Regulus with an honest, open expression, and he looked as if he was about to cry again.

“I just don’t understand why I’m not enough,” Regulus’ voice broke. He was trembling. These words were coming from a part of him that he tried to ignore, that he tried to keep hidden and stored away in tiny boxes that were never meant to see the light of day. But now that he had started to pull one out and clear the dust and open it up carefully, he couldn’t stop opening other boxes with recklessness, and pulling out their contents for Sirius to witness.

Sirius crossed the room to him in large strides and Regulus took a step back, “What are you doing?”

“I’m just going to try something. Jesus,” Sirius said, wrapping his arms around Regulus.

“Sirius,” Regulus went stiff in his arms. “Sirius, why are you doing this?” His voice sounded panicked.

“I know we’re,” Sirius was crying, Regulus could tell even though his face was buried in his shoulder. “I know we’re nowhere close to hugging but you were enough. You are enough, Regulus. I feel like saying it isn’t enough. I'm sorry I ever made you feel differently.” And Regulus cried. He began shaking in Sirius’ arms despite everything in him, telling him to keep it in, bottle it up, and move on, he cried like he hadn’t done in a long time. He felt like a small child again, when he let Sirius play the role of protector, of comforter, of caregiver. There was a time when this didn’t hurt, there was a time when Regulus wouldn’t have shied away from his touch.

He wished he felt comforted in Sirius’ arms. He wished it had provided that same feeling of relief and shelter he had when he was a kid, but it didn’t. Instead, he felt undeserving, he felt suffocated, because how could Sirius even want to hug him after all he’s done? How could Sirius want to comfort him despite everything? He didn’t deserve it, but he let Sirius hug him anyway because he was too tired to pull away.

“I couldn’t be there anymore Reg,” Sirius was whispering. “I couldn’t witness you get hurt. I couldn’t watch that. I couldn’t watch Orion send you into danger time and time again. And you did it so willingly. I was scared for you. I'm still scared for you," Sirius pulled away.

He sounded so honest. He was looking at Regulus so sincerely, and Regulus bit the inside of his cheek to keep from crying all over again. Regulus was so young when Sirius left, but Sirius was young too. He had to remember that.

“This is the last one,” Regulus said decidedly.

Sirius blinked the tears out of his eyes in surprise. “What?”

“This is the last heist, Sirius; this is the one.”

“I don’t believe you,” Sirius shook his head.

Regulus was wiping his tear-stained face harshly with the back of his hands. “Well it is.”

“You just said this is all that you are,” Sirius exclaimed gesturing around the room. “You’ve done this your whole life! What means more to you than this?”

Truthfully, Regulus was fairly certain that this was always going to be the last heist. He never really imagined anything after it. If the heist was successful, he would achieve everything he wanted. Fame, power, the ability to live on after death, being remembered, holding the past in his hands, altering history. That was all he ever wanted, but now maybe he wanted more for himself than he thought was possible. Maybe he wanted forgiveness. Maybe he wanted love. Maybe he wanted Brazil. If it was possible. Maybe it was possible.

“This is the last one,” Regulus said firmly. “Believe me or don’t, but it is, and I would really like to do it with you.”

“Regulus-”

"We started together, don't you want to go out together? Finish it together!"

"Regulus-"

“It wouldn’t be dangerous; not if we did it together-”

“Regulus-”

“And you’re so fucking smart Sirius! Don’t you want to put all your skills to good use again-”

“Regulus-”

“This is *the heist* , the one we always talked about when we were kids! All the fucking things we were going to do-”

“Regulus!” Sirius yelled, stopping Regulus’ ministrations. They were both staring at each other, Sirius was eyeing him with curious defiance.

“We’d be unstoppable if we worked together,” Regulus added more calmly.

Sirius was working through something in his mind, Regulus could see it churning behind his eyes. He looked around the room and years and years' worth of plans and ideas.

“What about Frank and Alice,” he asked after a moment.

“They would never have to know, not really– nothing they could prove. There would be no evidence left behind. You know that.”

“What about my job?”

“It was always a shitty alternative for the real thing anyway.”

“And you’d be done? I mean really done with all of it? With everything Regulus I mean it.”

Regulus nodded. For the first time, there was a spark of hope. Maybe they could actually do something *together* . As a team.

“Do I have a choice here?”

“What?”

“If I say no are you going to drag Remus in here? Shoot him?”

He sounded angrier now and Regulus closed his eyes thinking of how best to de-escalate the situation. It was a fair thing to say, but it didn't mean it didn't hurt.

“No I won’t shoot him,” he whispered. “If you don’t want to actively participate, I won't shoot him. But you can’t leave.”

“Obviously,” Sirius scoffed, but then something softened when he looked at Regulus. “I’m tired, Regulus,” he sighed after a minute.

Regulus didn't think it was just this conversation that prompted Sirius' weariness.

“Me too. Just…think about it maybe,” Regulus said softly. He didn’t want to press any further tonight. He didn’t want to open any more boxes.

Sirius let out a noncommittal noise while heading to the door but he stopped to look around one more time. “The plans look…good Regulus.”

Regulus did his best to fight a tiny smile pulling at his lips and the warm feeling trickled into his heart at those words.

“This isn’t even the half of it,” Regulus responded hoping to persuade Sirius a little further, to entice him.

Sirius just shook his head before walking out, closing the door behind him. Once he had left, Regulus allowed himself to relax slightly. He noticed the sun had gone down and it was completely dark outside. He noticed that he was incredibly exhausted. Who knew that this would take so much out of him? That speaking the truth and opening the boxes would allow emotions to permeate through his bones and into his marrow.

Regulus shook his head and blinked a few times to clear the haze. He fucking hated crying. He hated how it stung behind his eyes and stained his face, but he couldn’t deny that he felt slightly better, despite all of that.

Foggily, he treaded down the first flight of stairs, wondering to himself how late it was. He willed his feet to take each step, feeling as if he were trudging through quicksand. Just as he was about to round another flight and head to his room, he stopped on the second floor.

Impulsively, he let his feet carry him to James’ door. If anyone knew anything about emotional exhaustion surely it would be James Potter. Not to mention he was the only one Regulus wanted to talk to anyway.

He could see the light on from under the door and he knocked softly before he could think about what he was really doing. If anyone saw him out here, he would have a hard time explaining.

When there was no answer, Regulus turned the door handle gently and peeked his head in. “James?” he whispered softly.

His room was empty but it looked as if he just left. Quietly, he stepped in and closed the door behind him. His bed was unmade. Regulus rolled his eyes. It was important to make the bed first thing in the morning, it set a productive start to the day. But as Regulus continued to look at it, the unmade sheets made it look so comfortable. Like you could just crawl in, and Regulus was so tired. James was sure to be back any minute. He probably just went downstairs to get a glass of water.

Regulus would just sit on the bed and wait for him to come back. He'd be back here soon, and then they could talk. Regulus could tell him that he had followed his advice, that he had told Sirius how he felt.

He moved across the room and sat down. It was soft and it smelled like James, and God maybe Regulus was pathetic, but he was so tired that he was willing to add this to the list of other pathetic things he's done tonight, and he laid down.

He woke to a dark room and someone pulling at his feet. For a second he froze, forgetting where he was before he remembered quickly.

"James?"

"Shit. Sorry," James whispered in the dark. "I didn't mean to wake you up, but you fell asleep with your shoes on. It didn't look comfortable."

"Fuck, James. I'm so sorry. I thought you were coming right back and I was waiting for you and I fell asleep. If anyone had walked in here and seen me. Jesus, I'm going to leave." Regulus sat up.

"No, you don't have to leave. I can sleep on the floor or something."

"No, you absolutely cannot. I came down here to talk to you about Sirius, but-"

"Yeah," James let out a small laugh. "Yeah, I knew you were talking to him tonight. I went to your room and waited for you to get back, but I can see now why you never made it."

"I'm so sorry," Regulus felt his face heat up slightly. He was grateful for the darkness. "I'm going."

Regulus stood up, bumping into James in the dark. For a moment James placed a steadying hand on his arm and Regulus did his best to keep himself from collapsing into the touch.

"I'm here if you want to talk," James whispered softly.

"But you're still mad at me," Regulus said groggily.

"Yes, I am," James said into the dark. "But just because I'm mad doesn't mean I won't listen. It doesn't mean that you can't talk to me."

"Even though I… used Remus?" Regulus couldn't help himself.

James let in a sharp breath. "You're really not helping yourself here Regulus–"

"Sorry. Sorry," Regulus cut in quickly.

"But yes. I'm still here, even when I'm upset," James said quietly.

Regulus frowned slightly, even though James couldn't see him. "I'm sorry it's so hard for me to remember that." It was barely a whisper. "I wish it wasn't so hard for me to remember

that."

James let out a small noise before he whispered back, “it’s okay. I’ll just tell you every day. I don’t mind.”

Everyday. Us.

Regulus’ head was swimming. He heard James climb into bed.

“Goodnight James,” Regulus opened the door at last.

“Goodnight Regulus. I’ll see you tomorrow,” James murmured.

—---

“Remind me why we’re doing this again,” Evan grumbled, following everyone out.

“Because everyone is in a terrible mood and the weather is nice and Remus, Dorcas, and I spent a fair amount of time preparing this picnic and you did nothing so come out and at least enjoy it,” Mary called ushering everyone outside.

“Mary and Dorcas did most of this, I just cut the fruit,” Remus corrected lightly.

“But it’s the weekend we don’t even have class,” Evan countered. “Regulus and Sirius aren’t here.”

James frowned at this. He wished Regulus would have come and he wasn’t entirely sure how responsible it was to leave the brothers all alone in the house together. He was worried they’d burn the entire place down. Regulus hadn’t said much about his conversation with Sirius that happened three days ago, and James didn’t want to push him. Despite seeming ready that night in his room, Regulus didn't want to talk much about it the next day. James wasn't fazed though. He would tell him when he was ready.

“Oh come on Rosier,” Barty sang. “It’s nice to be among the flowers and the sunshine,” he teased.

It was a nice day, the sun was warm on James’ skin but the breeze was cool and soft. Mary and Dorcas had taken the time to set up blankets and a wide array of picnic items everywhere. The lawn wasn’t well tended to so wildflowers were sprouting up from the ground in little bundles next to weeds.

“I fucking hate bugs,” Evan jumped away from a fly buzzing lazily by.

“Sorry, there’s no wine. We were going to try and swing it but we didn’t want to get caught breaking the rules…given the whole…” Dorcas’ eyes flitted over to Remus who was staring at the ground. “Well you know.”

“Oh yeah we definitely know, don’t we Evan,” Barty grinned, nudging him.

“Bit of a sore subject still,” Remus glared at them.

“Well, we’re good in our books,” Evan shrugged. “Got it all squared away in the end.”

Remus didn’t respond.

Soon everyone had piled their plates high with fruits and crackers and cheese and sat in little groups talking under the sun.

Marlene and Dorcas were chattering away underneath the shade of a tree. Dorcas was telling a story and Marlene’s laugh echoed loudly. They both looked absolutely devoted to one another. James smiled to himself, watching them for a moment. It was nice when they could be together like this. It was nice when they were happy, even if the jilted lovers club was down a member.

Barty, Evan, and Peter were all playing some game that James didn’t understand in the slightest. It involved a lot of running in all directions and yelling though, while Mary and Lily were talking and keeping score on the sidelines.

Remus was laying in the sun with James reading. He seemed absorbed in whatever story it was and James fought the urge to ask him if it was from Regulus’ library. For a while, they sat in content silence, Remus reading and James laying on his back soaking in the sun’s warmth before Remus spoke.

“So you and Sirius seem to be getting to know each other.”

James could tell it was a slightly loaded question. Remus didn’t take his eyes off the book in his hands.

“We just talk sometimes. At first, he had questions about stuff. Like if everyone takes notes in class and do we ever do hands-on training; things like that.”

“Hmm,” Remus turned the page of his book loudly.

“He's an easy person to talk to. Plus we’re part of a mutual club,” James grinned.

“What club is that? The having complicated emotions about Regulus Black club?”

“Damn Remus, who hurt you?” James gasped exaggeratedly, turning on his side to look at Remus. His glasses were slightly crooked on his face and he propped his head up with his hand.

“Of people presently here or ever?” Remus replied wryly.

James shook his head. “I see why you like him so much. Sirius. He’s exactly your type.”

Remus stiffened slightly. “Yeah, he’s perfect,” he sighed. "Even if he is Regulus' brother."

“He’ll come around you know. Don’t give up,” James added encouragingly. “I’m in the process of filling his head with great things about you as we speak. Every day in class I’m telling him things like ‘Remus looks so nice today’ or ‘Don’t you like the jumper Remus is

wearing? I got it for him for his birthday.' And I think it's working," James offered a smug smile.

In the distance, Peter was yelling at Barty about cheating the rules of the game. Barty was grinning and repeating 'that's just life, baby,' over and over again, much to Peter's consternation.

"Is it," Remus tried to fight his smile, putting his book down finally to look at James.

"Well," James hesitated. "It's going to work. Don't give up. I can talk to Regulus to see what Sirius likes. Maybe you can write him a poem or something."

Remus let out a loud laugh. "James, oh my God."

"What? It was just a suggestion," James blushed, swatting at his friend with his hands. "I said or something! It doesn't have to be a poem."

Remus' laughter subsided and he regarded James thoughtfully for a minute. "So you're still talking to Regulus then?"

"Well, I'm not like, *talking* talking to him. It's just, things are really hard for him with Sirius being here and, um, I…No, I know things are hard for you with Sirius being here and that's his fault and I want you to know that I'm still mad at him for what he did and, I…,"

"James, James. It's fine. It was just a question," Remus held his hands up, putting an end to James' flailing.

James fell quiet, frowning.

"If you want to talk to him, that's fine with me," Remus said quietly after a minute. "If you want to forgive him that's fine with me too, not that you ever needed my permission in the first place."

James looked at Remus carefully, but Remus was staring at Marlene and Dorcas under the tree.

"'I mean, I'm not saying what he did was right at all, but I did break the rules and he let me continue to work on the heist. He also told me the last thing he wanted was for me to die. That has to count for something right?"

"He said that," James asked, his eyes wide.

Remus nodded slowly. "And you really like him, James. I can tell."

"Yeah," James whispered feeling a bit embarrassed. "Does that make me a horrible friend, Remus? After what he did to you? How can I still feel this way about him?"

"James," Remus looked at him sharply. "You are the best friend I've ever had. Maybe that doesn't mean too much because I don't have a lot of friends, but you have never been a bad friend to me. I don't think you're capable of it."

James felt a wave of relief wash over him as he smiled softly at Remus.

“Besides,” Remus continued. “I know there’s something else going on with you two. Or there was.”

James stiffened before sitting up. “Remus wh-”

“We were at dinner one night a few weeks ago and Mary had said something to you and you laughed," Remus interrupted. "I was coming back from the kitchen and I saw the look on Regulus’ face. The way he was looking at you, James, before he remembered where he was, even an idiot would be able to tell something was going on. Whatever complicated feelings you have for Regulus, I can tell you he reciprocates.”

James didn’t even try to quell the butterflies in his stomach at hearing this news. He wanted to feel like this all the time, giddy and lightheaded. “Oh, um I–”

Remus waved his hand dismissively. “I’m just saying James, if you want to make a move, I’m not going to stop you. But if he accepts, Barty and Evan better put a gun to his head. And you know what else? I want his blessing. Yeah, I want his *blessing* for me and Sirius if it ever works out between us. I want an apology too. But yeah, otherwise I won't stop you.”

James was only partially sure he was joking.

“But you and him and everything that happened,” James shook his head.

“When I marry Sirius he’ll be my brother-in-law anyway, so might as well start the process of getting along now,” Remus shrugged casually.

“Marry!?” James screeched as all of his thoughts came to a halt.

“That was a joke! It was a joke! But you get my point,” Remus shook his head with a grin.

Marlene and Dorcas were looking over at them as James fell back into the grass laughing deliriously, clutching his sides.

“What? I’m speaking things out into the universe. I think the sunshine is making me optimistic today,” Remus laughed alongside James. “It was a joke though. It was a joke!”

“At least I know you’re not giving up,” James gasped out of breath.

“For Sirius Black, I’ll keep trying until there are no days left,” Remus said firmly, picking his book back up.

"God, even the word marriage makes me happy. I fucking love weddings Remus. Did you know that?"

"Yes," Remus grinned. "Even though you always cry when people say their vows. That wedding we went to last year, we crashed it! We didn't even know anyone there and you still cried!" Remus was laughing again.

"I can't help it," James shook his head with a soft smile. "Everyone is just so happy and I can't help it," James rolled around in the grass, hiding his face in his hands.

Remus let out a soft sigh at the state of his friend before turning back to his book.

After a while James closed his eyes, feeling the sunshine on his face. In the distance, he heard Lily laughing as Evan was shouting at Peter to tackle Barty. He felt lighter than he had in a while. Mary was right, the sunlight and nice weather were good for everyone.

Chapter End Notes

I'm sorry for the heavy intro. On a lighter note, ya girl is graduating college on friday (lmao wild) so it's going to be a pretty busy week for me. This might mean the next update will take me the full week to put out (but maybe not! who knows? certainly not me)

Chapter 22: Idling in Neutral

Chapter Summary

An entire chapter in Regulus' POV? That's hot.

Chapter Notes

Is it Monday for y'all yet? bc it's Monday for me so here's the chapter :)
tw: mentions of gun violence and childhood abuse

See the end of the chapter for more notes

James never came to Regulus' room during the day. Not on his own anyway, he was a strict nighttime visitor. Not because he didn't want to come to Regulus' room during the day, but because Regulus had told him not to. If they wanted to meet during the day, Regulus would find him, but recently, ever since Sirius, they hadn't met during the day at all. Given this information that Regulus knew so well, he wasn't sure why he was so disappointed when he opened his bedroom door and James wasn't staring back at him.

Sirius was, however. He was standing outside with a look of determination, and Regulus took a second to get over his brief surprise. He thought it was a bit ridiculous that Sirius was wearing a leather jacket indoors. It was eight in the morning. The jacket was excessive.

"Come in," Regulus stepped aside to let him through the door.

"Tell me I'm fucking crazy but-"

"You're fucking crazy," Regulus deadpanned.

"Okay, I wasn't finished yet," Sirius quipped but he was holding back a small smile.

It had been almost two weeks since Regulus had attempted to show Sirius the heist plans. Since then, things had felt slightly better between them. There was still an entangled mess of needles and thorns just below the surface waiting to slice them, eager to draw blood, but they were both working towards understanding. Not forgiveness, not clemency, or even normalcy, but tolerance.

"I want to see the heist plans," Sirius spoke firmly with a nod of his head.

Regulus eyed him carefully and Sirius stared back with a straight-faced expression. He took a determined stance, his shoulders were drawn back and his feet were planted firmly on the

floor. He seemed unwavering and immovable. This was the goal, this is what Regulus wanted. This was bridging the divide, working in tandem with his brother, having common ground. This was always the goal. But to achieve this, Regulus would have to place an incredible amount of trust in Sirius. Trust that he wasn't sure he was ready to extend.

What if Sirius only wanted the plans so that he could figure out a way to thwart the heist? Would he risk mutiny knowing it put everyone else's lives in danger? Did Sirius believe that Regulus could play the role of executioner for members of his team or would the inkling of doubt be enough for him to rebel?

He had always wanted this, but now that it was an arm's length away, he was afraid to reach out and grab it.

"Sirius," he began carefully. "Seeing the plans means-"

"-Fully committing to the heist, I know." Sirius' expression remained unwavering.

Regulus frowned at him slightly, attempting to calculate all the reasons Sirius could have for doing this. He began running through the list of the worst possible outcomes.

"This isn't me just bending to your will," Sirius continued. "This is a mutual exchange of trust. I do this heist and you give up this life forever. As in, you go on the fucking straight and narrow. No crime at all and you cut ties with Lucius, Mulciber, Avery– all of them. You take the money, travel the world, go back to France, start a legal business, I don't care, as long as it's safe. As long as you're safe."

Sirius looked sincere. He looked as if he had put a great deal of thought into this proposal and he sounded confident in it, but cutting ties with Lucius meant cutting ties with Narcissa– which wasn't going to happen. Regulus wanted to make a quick remark about how it wasn't so easy for him to cut out family–he wasn't like Sirius in that regard, but he held his tongue. They could talk about the Narcissa thing at a later time.

"And you're in on the heist," Regulus asked after a moment, not sounding at all like he believed it.

"Committed to it," Sirius nodded for emphasis.

"How can I trust you? How do I know you're not just doing this to use it against me?"

"You don't," Sirius shrugged. "Just like I don't know that you won't use me to finish this heist, leave me high and dry without a job and without friends in the middle of America, and continue on your journey of self-destruction. But we have to start somewhere."

"And you want to start to trust me," Regulus asked quietly.

Sirius clenched his jaw slightly and his eyes scanned over Regulus' face as if he could calculate the risk Regulus posed just by looking at him. "I want to start… something."

And that made sense to Regulus because he wanted to start something too. Trust was too much for both of them at the moment, but something, something Regulus could get behind.

Just starting was a big enough feat in itself. The seconds seemed to stretch on forever between them.

“Okay.”

Sirius blinked rapidly. “Okay?”

“Okay. You can see the plans. And if you follow through on your end of the deal, I’ll follow through on mine.”

Sirius narrowed his eyes in suspicion.

“Oh come on,” Regulus sighed exasperatedly. “If we start this, we’ll be going back and forth all day.”

“No, I know, I know. It’s just– how do we make this official? Should we draw up a contract,” Sirius furrowed his brows in thought.

Stupidly, Regulus thought about holding out his pinky the way James had done all those nights ago. But he knew Sirius would look at him as if he’d grown a second head. Besides, he liked keeping that between James and himself. He liked keeping James and everything about him close to his chest, close to his heart.

“Can our word not be enough,” Regulus asked.

Sirius sighed, frowning slightly. “It’s a start.”

“It’s a start,” Regulus echoed, heading towards the door.

“Where are you going,” Sirius asked looking after him.

“To show you the plans. Come on.”

“Wait, right now,” Sirius trailed behind him, his footsteps making uncertain and uneven echoes through the halls.

“Is that a problem,” Regulus arched an eyebrow even though Sirius was walking behind him. and couldn’t see his expression.

Mary passed by them as she walked down the stairs and did a double take, but decided against saying anything.

“No, I just thought you’d need time to collect everything and set it all up again.”

“It’s already set up,” Regulus responded, opening a different door on the third floor from last time. “I just moved it all.”

“You actually did move it,” Sirius breathed as he walked into the room.

“I said I would.”

Regulus closed the door and stood back as Sirius began pouring over all of the notes and plans with meticulous care. He ran his fingers delicately over the words and images tacked to the walls. Sometimes he would mutter to himself or move frantically about the room in an unorganised fashion, and Regulus did his best to stay out of his way. He was hungry for all the knowledge the plans contained and it was evident in the way his eyes darted from page to page in a frenzy.

He looked enraptured at everything around him. Even though Regulus was the only one in there, anyone would've been able to tell that Sirius was in his element. He wasn't even trying to hide it.

"Regulus this plan is…" Sirius trailed off. Regulus wasn't sure if they had been there for minutes or for hours. It was probably somewhere in between.

"Faulty? Misguided? Convoluted?" Regulus attempted to fill in the blanks.

"There aren't even words," Sirius shook his head incredulously. "I've never seen anything like it. And I never will again. Your mind is fucking terrifying. Brilliant but terrifying."

Regulus clasped his hands behind his back and tried to hold in his relief. "Thank you, but I'm looking for plot holes, missteps, areas where I over or underestimate. Errors. Where are the errors?"

Sirius shook his head looking around. "You accounted for everything. Everything. I mean right down to moonlight visibility and licence plate numbers," Sirius pointed to a chart for emphasis. "Regulus you're fucking brilliant. Can I come in here to keep looking at this?"

Regulus felt himself nod. "Can you just let me know wherever you want to see the outlines?"

"Yeah of course," Sirius was hardly paying attention to him. His voice was light and his eyes were wide. "Actually, I do have a question though," Sirius said turning back to face Regulus.

Regulus stared back expectantly.

"The museum storage in the basement houses 1,700 paintings and 890 sculptural works. And those are just the ones that are catalogued"

"Yes," Regulus nodded anticipating Sirius' line of thinking.

"Some of them are just as valuable if not more valuable than the ones on display. So why take the ones in the gallery? Surely it would be quicker to break into storage and take the ones not mounted to the wall."

"Those storage spaces are kept under a lot of security. We'd need access to employee codes and id cards or we'd have to override the system," Regulus looked at him doubtfully.

"And? You have Dorcas working for you, isn't that her speciality? I doubt she'd find it very hard."

“Okay well, then there’s the issue of my team. Museum storage spaces aren’t organised with a set layout. Paintings can be located anywhere, I can’t give them specific instructions to follow and a lot of them are new to this, so I don’t trust their ability to improvise.” Regulus was thinking quickly through Sirius’ proposed idea. “And notoriety. Half of this heist is about legacy. The shock value is much higher and the crime is much more difficult to cover up when paintings are taken directly off the gallery walls.”

Sirius nodded quickly. “I know. But now you have me.”

Regulus jolted at that statement and tried to recover quickly. Was it really that easy? Was everything working almost exactly as he had imagined it? Did he just have Sirius working on the heist? After everything? And the way he had said it so casually too. Was Sirius not grasping the gravity of his words?

“What you don’t think I can do it? If anyone can steal from museum storage, you know it’s me. That’s all Orion used to have me do. Don’t you remember?” Sirius was speaking with an almost arrogant and rushed tone. He seemed to Regulus as if he’d forgotten entirely how opposed he was to the entire notion of the heist.

Regulus nodded slowly. “I remember. The first time you went, you’d managed to take everything father asked for. And then you also stole that small bust. The little statue that could fit in your pocket,” he recalled with a soft smile. “It was an impossible undertaking and you still managed to grab something extra too.”

“Yeah,” Sirius nodded enthusiastically. “It was called ‘Statue of a Young Boy with Windswept Hair.’ I took it because it reminded me of you. A little pocket-sized Regulus.”

Regulus shook his head but he was smiling anyway. He remembers when Sirius brought it home. He was still too young to go out with the team on actual runs so had spent most of the night sulking in his room and was jealous that Sirius was able to put all his training to good use.

When Sirius had returned that night, Regulus had never seen him look so elated, so thrilled. He slipped the little statue from his pocket and told Regulus all about how he wasn’t supposed to grab it but he did anyway and how they were the only two people who knew about Sirius’ slight deviation from the plan. Sirius was always a rebel. He could never follow the rules, but that time it was okay with Regulus because Sirius had thought about him. In the middle of his first operation, with everything at stake, he took something because it reminded him of Regulus. He couldn’t even begin to imagine what would happen if their father ever found out what Sirius had done, but Regulus never said a word. It was a secret between the two boys and one of Sirius’ proudest accomplishments at the time.

Sirius had taken it and not even bothered to remember the artist’s name. Regulus had spent a lot of time over the subsequent months attempting to figure out who made it and when. As far as his research could discern, it was made sometime in the mid-17th century. Then, when Sirius left, the statue disappeared. Regulus figured that he had thrown it out. It was a relic from a life he’d always wanted to forget, a memory of a time he wished never happened.

Regulus’ smile fell.

“I’m saying, have your runners do your plan, it’ll go perfectly, and you send me down there to the basement. I’m sure I could snag a Velasquez, a few impressionists, a Turner. Our profits would increase exponentially, and I obviously know what I’m doing.” Sirius was speaking quickly with excitement. “We’d make more money, I’d steal pieces that the museum couldn’t brush under the rug, and I’m perfect with improvisation.”

Regulus’ eyes darted back and forth across Sirius’ face nervously.

“Can you give me a few days to draw up some plans? I need to talk to Dorcas and see if she can even crack into the security system for the basement, just so I can get an idea of the layout. I’ll come to you once I have something more solid in place. Does that work?”

Regulus took a small step back in surprise. He wasn’t sure what to think about all of this. His head was spinning too fast to form coherent thoughts.

“Regulus, come on. Isn’t this what you wanted? This is exactly what you wanted,” Sirius was staring at him in frustration. When Regulus still didn’t answer, Sirius began to get angrier. “What the hell is wrong with you?”

“I don’t know! I know this is what I wanted just, give me one fucking minute to think,” Regulus snapped quickly. “You speaking up in class, you asking questions occasionally the last two weeks isn’t enough for me to just hand over all of this to you!”

“You want me working with you, you don’t want me working with you, figure out what the fuck it is that you’re doing next time before you drag me into your shit,” Sirius shook his head, walking towards the door.

“No Sirius,” Regulus breathed out a sigh of frustration. He didn’t want him to leave. Not when he was so close. “I– okay. If you and Dorcas can come up with a solid, viable plan, I’ll look over it.” Regulus ran a distressed hand through his hair.

“Perfect,” Sirius stopped just short of the door and turned around to smirk at Regulus.

“You’re not worried about becoming an accessory to a crime?” Regulus’ voice was riddled with doubt. They were navigating a tempestuous zone. Regulus felt every tentative and faulty footstep.

“Only if we get caught, but Regulus,” Sirius gestured around the room in a sweeping motion, “we’re not going to get caught. I mean, fuck even if we do, you have contingency plans for that as well.” Sirius let out a small laugh.

So much for his morals, Regulus thought to himself. He regarded Sirius carefully, as if that would give him some kind of indication of whether or not to trust him. He was waiting for the giant neon sign to appear above his head in either red or green flashing lights.

“I’ll get you the plans in a few days,” Sirius said more softly this time and Regulus nodded. “I mean it, Regulus. After this, you’re done.”

“Yeah that’s typically how deals work,” Regulus responded wryly.

Sirius shook his head, “look, I know that you’re extending the trust first here, which is…hard but just know that I’m counting on you to actually follow through after I’ve held up my end. Which is also hard.”

“Yeah that’s typically how deals work,” Regulus repeated. He couldn’t help himself.

“Okay, okay,” Sirius rolled his eyes heading for the door again. He paused just before he opened it to look back at Regulus. “Do you think Orion would be proud of me for doing this,” he asked quietly.

If it had been anyone else, Regulus would’ve probably said yes, but this was Sirius, and he knew his brother. “No, are you kidding? He’d take one look at your long hair and accuse you of tarnishing the family name,” Regulus puffed.

Sirius looked at him with amusement. “Yeah, you’re probably right about that.”

“It looks good though,” Regulus added. “Your hair. I’m glad you finally got to grow it out like you always wanted.” *I’m glad you found the freedom to express yourself that they tried to stifle out of you.*

“Thanks,” Sirius touched his hair softly before turning back towards the door. He seemed lighter, more assured.

“Wait, Sirius,” Regulus strained slightly. There was one more thing he had to do. One more thing he wanted to do, even if it was hard. “You and Remus,” he began.

Sirius seemed to tense up slightly, going rigid.

“I know things are rough between the two of you now and that it’s my fault, but I want you to know that…I want you to know that if you’re working on the heist now, and you are committed to it like you say you are, then…it’s a little different from when you were on the outside trying to get in.”

“I don’t understand,” Sirius’ gaze was burning into him.

“Well you’re not exactly going to use anything Remus tells you against us and you know what he knows now, maybe even more,” Regulus looked pointedly around the room. “I’d say that dating between team members isn’t allowed because it complicates things but…things are already complicated between you two anyway.”

“I’ll say,” Sirius scoffed.

“I’m trying to say that if you want to…fix things with him…I won’t…I won’t get in your way,” Regulus was tiptoeing as carefully as he could.

“Wow, thank you so fucking much Regulus. I really needed your permission to fix things with Remus, that’s great,” Sirius’ voice dripped with sarcasm, but he went slightly pale.

Didn’t he though? Regulus kept that thought to himself. Instead, he just shrugged, “whatever.” He just thought he would float the idea out there.

He did like Remus. He was the only one who actually used the library. And James liked Remus, so he had to try. Maybe he would try again another day. Correcting his wrongs in incremental movements.

“When I need in here, is this stuff still going to be up,” Sirius asked, still slightly on edge. He looked around the room again, appearing as if he was trying to commit everything to memory.

“Yes,” Regulus nodded. “Just tell me when you’re coming in here, please.”

“Okay,” Sirius nodded before he actually walked out, and Regulus let him.

He still wasn’t sure what to think of the entire thing. He was waiting for the foreboding feeling to overtake him, he was waiting for the alarm bells to go off in his head, but everything was silent. Perhaps that was the most unnerving feeling of all; idling in neutral.

Regulus was tired of idling in neutral, and in the most ridiculous spur-of-the-moment idea, he rushed out of the room and headed down the stairs to the second floor knocking loudly in his invigorated state.

James opened the door with a flourish. “Regulus-”

Oh, God. The sight of James always made him falter. He was wearing a plain red t-shirt that showed off his muscular arms and he looked at him with soft brown eyes through long eyelashes. Regulus fought the urge to scream; he took a small step back instead, unsure of what to do in the wake of all that beauty.

“Are you busy? Can you go somewhere with me?” Regulus breathed out quickly. God, this was the most ridiculous thing he’d ever done. Mainly because it was done with no forethought. He had no time to think any of this through at all.

“Yeah, of course. It’s the middle of the day. Is everything okay?” James asked, scrambling around the room to put on his shoes.

“I think so,” Regulus answered truthfully. He was terrified, but there was a small undercurrent of excitement running through him as well. That undercurrent seemed ever-present in the proximity of James Potter.

Soon, they were both in the car, and James was pestering him with a million questions.

“Where are we going?”

“I didn’t tell you the first hundred times you asked, what makes you think this time will be different?”

“I’m optimistic,” James grinned from the passenger seat. “What is the reason for this… outing? Is it work related or?”

“No, it’s just a…fuck, you’ll see in a few minutes,” Regulus sighed, shaking his head.

James let out a groan of frustration. They drove the rest of the way in silence, occasionally James would wince or close his eyes when Regulus had a few driving mishaps, but he was always dramatic like that when it came to Regulus' driving.

Regulus was attempting to rehearse what he was going to say in his head, his hands were shaking slightly around the steering wheel. It was a dead giveaway that he was nervous, but he couldn't make them stop.

"We're at the Braxton," James asked softly when Regulus pulled into the parking spot.

Regulus nodded. He didn't trust himself to speak just yet. He led them inside into the cold museum air. It wasn't crowded– it never was. A small blonde woman at the visitor's desk smiled a little too long at James. He read her shiny name tag with ' *Genevieve* ' scrawled out in black letters. Regulus attempted to explode her with his mind.

He walked determinedly through the galleries until he got where he wanted to go. The only other person in the room was a security guard who ambled lazily into the next open area as Regulus and James approached.

"Oh," James whispered, taking in the painting before them. The sweeping strokes of the grey gathering storm clouds and the blue hues of the sea welcomed them. "It's the Aivazovsky. Hello again," James greeted the painting like an old friend.

"Can we sit?" Regulus gestured to the bench in front of the painting and James nodded, taking a seat.

Regulus sat next to him and gripped the edge of the bench tightly, biting his lip nervously. For a moment neither of them spoke, they just stared at the painting in front of them. Regulus was struck by how precise the title was, *Gathering Storm* .

Storms didn't have to be terrifying or ominous. Regulus rather liked thunderstorms, there was something cathartic in their release, something comforting in their nature. Perhaps in the context of this work, the storm was more perilous for the people on the ship. Or maybe it was a sign of braving the unknown, a challenge to make it out to the other side.

It was time for Regulus to brave the storm.

"So I'm going to say some things," Regulus began and James turned to look at him. "No, actually can you not do that. I'm nervous enough as is," Regulus strained and James turned his head to look back at the painting. "Thank you," Regulus breathed. He took a deep breath, feeling the air enter his lungs and attempted to clarify his thoughts slightly.

"When I was growing up, my capacity to be loved was predicated upon my usefulness. For centuries the Black family has established a name for themselves by being art thieves. We were connected to the upper echelons of society, but to dangerous people. Ever since I was little, I was trained for this life, I was put into dangerous situations by parents who were supposed to look out for me, and I've never known anything else. Sirius and I were punished harshly for everything. Speaking out of turn, being unable to pick complicated locks, laughing too loud, crying. We were beaten, starved, and I've had bones broken. I was

completing large-scale crimes by the time I was ten. My father had Sirius and me working alongside violent men, murderers and sadists." Regulus' thoughts were pouring out of him. He couldn't tell if he was in the storm or he was the storm. Maybe it was possible to be both.

"Sirius and I had different approaches to growing up the way we did. I conformed. I adapted. I did what was asked of me when it was asked of me. It's pathetic, I know, but every time I did something right, I kept waiting for them to love me, to say they were proud of me, to look at me with approval, anything. I was desperately seeking that approval, clawing and scraping for it, because I," Regulus took a shaky breath in and closed his eyes tightly. "I thought, if I could still love them after everything they had done, then what was so horrible about me that they couldn't love me back? I tried to be perfect, but it was never enough for them. I'm still trying to be enough" Regulus hated the way his voice cracked, but he continued on. "Sirius was smarter than I ever was. He learned quickly that there was nothing he could do to win their approval so he stopped trying altogether. He would act out, he could see through the excitement and the thrill of the heists, he could see the danger in them. He knew parents weren't supposed to be like ours and he tried to tell me all the time, but I never listened."

James was listening carefully, but still staring at the painting like Regulus had asked. He wasn't sure when James had moved his hand to rest lightly on his own, he was gripping the edge of the bench so tightly that his knuckles were white, but it was nice. It was slightly grounding, a soft way to let Regulus know that he was there.

"One night," Regulus choked out, "one night I watched Sirius get shot. My father was there along with three of his men that worked for him. Sirius was there, laying on the marble floor and the blood was pouring out of him. My father took his men and instructed us all to leave him there. We had to leave while we had the money and the painting from a deal gone wrong. We couldn't waste time-saving him when we had belongings to transfer. Sirius, he called out for both of us," Regulus was shaking now in an effort to keep from crying. "I should've run to him, I should've held his hand and told him it was going to be okay, but I followed Orion out. I left him there on the cold floor, thinking he was going to die. I managed to call my cousin for help after I broke away from my father. I broke all of his rules about contact with the outside world during a heist. He was always paranoid about that, but Andromeda? She was the one who ran to Sirius. She was the one who held his hand and took him to a hospital and nursed him better. And then when Sirius left me, I had the nerve to be angry at him. That night will haunt me forever. It's the worst thing I've ever done. It's the worst thing I'll ever do, and I'll never forgive myself for it."

James was rubbing small soothing circles on the back of Regulus' hand. How he could stand to touch him after all he was revealing was unfathomable. Regulus' lips trembled.

"Sirius was my protector. He took the worst of everything for me. He helped me get an actual education, and he tried in his own way to show me what love was, but he also promised he'd never leave me. He was the one my parents always wanted, the firstborn, the family legacy. He never made things any easier on himself when he was here either. That always infuriated me. Like maybe if he had just listened to them a little more, everything wouldn't be so unbearable. He would've stayed. Maybe if I was enough he would've stayed for me. I know that's not fair to put on him either, but it's how I feel."

Now that Regulus had started he couldn't stop. He told James everything. The worst parts of his childhood, the encounter with Sirius in the hotel room, the heists he had done with Barty and Evan, the conversations he'd had with Sirius when he'd borrowed some of James' bravery. He told him about the first boy he had ever liked and his deranged extended family. Anything he could think of. He was pulling out the boxes one by one and unpacking all of the contents.

James listened to every word Regulus said with careful and delicate attention. He didn't interrupt, he didn't ask questions, he just let Regulus say everything he needed to. Regulus wasn't sure when he had started crying. The guard in the gallery stood off to the side and kept casting weary and concerned glances his way, but Regulus was speaking too softly for him to hear anything anyway, so he didn't really care. James had shifted closer so that their arms were touching, yet again providing Regulus a brief respite

He told James about Sirius joining the heist and how he didn't entirely trust him but how he wanted to. He told him about how he was trying to fix things between his brother and Remus. He apologised profusely for everything, even for the things that had nothing to do with James at all, and then he stopped for a minute. Waves of relief and nausea rolled over him simultaneously as they both sat in silence.

"I'm telling you all of this because the first time we were in front of this painting, you said you should've kissed me. You came to my room and you asked for a do-over. You wanted to go back in time and try again. I'm telling you all of this… I'm telling you all of the worst things I've ever done and I'm asking for a do-over now. I'm asking for you to know who I am, to know what I've done, and to forgive me anyway. I'm a lot of things, James, and selfish is one of them. I know it's selfish to ask for your forgiveness after all that I've done, but the first time I saw you, I knew I wanted you close to me. You're golden and blinding and you love *so* much, just to be close to you, just to witness your magic would be enough for me. If you can afford me that small kindness. I–" Regulus' voice cracked again. "I haven't had very many good things in my life. I don't know what to do with them, how to keep them, how to love them, and God knows I don't deserve them, but I want to try. For you, I'll try every day if you'll let me. Because you are good James, you're so good."

He paused. He had been speaking for so long, but finally, everything was out there. For better or for worse, James had everything. James had Regulus in the palm of his hand, and now he had to decide what to do with him.

"That's all I wanted to say really. You don't have to say anything at all. We can get in the car and drive back to the house and pretend like none of this happened too," Regulus pulled at his curls nervously after his tears had dried and James was still staring at the painting. His heart was beating quickly again, but James' hand was still on his own. That had to be a good sign at least. Right?

"Regulus," James said softly, turning to look at him finally. And oh, there it was, James' insane ability to take his breath away. Every time. "I forgive you. I forgive you in every lifetime in this one and the next one and all the ones before this one and all the ones after it. Anything you could ever do, anything you will ever do. I forgive you for it all."

And *oh. Oh* , what a relief that was. What an indescribable feeling it was to sit there under the stare of James Potter with his soul flayed open for him to see and be forgiven anyway.

"I can't ever stay mad at you, not really," James breathed out and in one sweeping motion, he leaned over and pulled Regulus into his lap and kissed him. It was gentle and chaste. Regulus' heart fluttered in his chest. He didn't deserve him. He didn't deserve James at all, but he was selfish enough to not let that fact stop him. He ran his fingers through the hair at the base of James' neck. Lightly tracing his fingers there, ever so careful with the sun under his fingertips.

James wrapped his arms around Regulus tightly and he sighed, suppressing the urge to let out a sob of relief. This is where he belonged. This was where he was always meant to be. He felt that knowledge course through his bloodstream as he relaxed slightly. There was no point in fighting indisputable facts. James buried his face in Regulus' curls and kissed the top of his head and then his forehead and then the tip of his nose before kissing him once more on his lips. It was soft, it was saccharine, it was forgiveness.

In the painting behind them, the seascape remained unchanged, but Regulus was an entirely different person from mere moments before. Water was chaos, it was destructive and tumultuous. It would drown entire cities and sink ships. But it was also a sustaining life force, it was cleansing, it was renewal. If it could be capable of both destruction and restoration, maybe, just maybe, Regulus could be too.

Chapter End Notes

i love regulus black send tweet

Chapter 23: Calamitous Caravaggio

Chapter Summary

Jegulus and Wolfstar and Caravaggio oh my

Chapter Notes

This chapter is short and really just tying somethings up before we get back into the action <3
tw: slight sexual content very mild

See the end of the chapter for more notes

James was reeling from everything that Regulus had told him. He needed to take some time to think through everything that he had said, to go line by line and commit everything to memory. To know Regulus when he let so few people in, to be the one person that Regulus felt safe enough around to show all of himself, made James dizzyingly weak. What a privilege it was.

Regulus had wrapped both his arms around James' arm, hugging it tightly as he pulled him through the gallery. He was murmuring about the different paintings again, holding James close by the arm as if he were afraid to let him go. James didn't mind though. His hand found Regulus' and he intertwined their fingers feeling the cool metal of his snake ring. It was nice to have Regulus like this, to show affection in public, and even though there was no one else here, it felt nice not to hide behind closed doors.

"I like this one," James said as Regulus dragged them in front of a painting with a boy holding a basket of fruit. "The curls remind me of yours." James kissed the side of Regulus' temple and relished in the way it made his eyes flutter closed for a moment.

Regulus hummed. "It's Caravaggio."

"Next time, I'll have you pose with a basket of fruit and I'll paint you again like this," James smiled, looking carefully looking over the canvas. Regulus would look hot as hell holding a basket of fruit like that, a loose white shirt sliding off his shoulder.

Next to him, Regulus let out a little huff. "My hair looks way better than that."

"It does," James laughed feeling light. Then after a moment, when it appeared Regulus wasn't going to say anything, James prompted him. "Go on, where's the story Regulus, I'm

ready to learn."

Regulus began playing with James' fingers, a soft smile on his face. "Oh my God James Caravaggio… he was an Italian painter and he was so dramatic. Look at the way he plays with light here. All the dark and shadowing. He pioneered that, it's called tenebrism."

"Tenebrism," James echoed to show he was listening. Regulus' voice was always so nice to listen to. James could listen to him read the dictionary cover to cover and hang on to every word. His slight accent and lilt drew James in every time and he waited for Regulus to get to the good part. His favourite part. Regulus would always start with the art, the most important information. He would talk about techniques and movements, but then he would always share something salacious about the art or the artist, and it would always make James laugh or smile with delight.

"Caravaggio was a criminal as well as an artistic mastermind. He was brought to court at least eleven times which were documented. He was arrested for all kinds of things, carrying a sword without a permit, beating a man with a stick, throwing rocks at police, not paying rent. Then he had a whole feud with a rival painter, Giovanni Baglione. Baglione accused Caravaggio of hiring assassins to kill him."

"No," James gasped, still looking at the boy with the fruit. "Did he actually?"

"No one can prove it, but they can prove that Caravaggio did write a lot of poetry about Baglione's art. He said the only thing Baglione's art was good for was wiping your arse with it."

James let out a loud laugh that echoed around the empty gallery and Regulus grinned.

"Baglione sued Caravaggio for libel and won. Caravaggio spent two weeks in jail for that. He threw a plate of artichokes in a waiter's face and went to prison for that as well."

"Ah, so he wasn't just known for his drama in paintings then," James shook his head.

"No, he was certainly dramatic in all aspects of life," Regulus laughed before continuing. "Then in 1606, he killed a man. Supposedly, they were both sleeping with the same woman. Anyway, he fled from Rome after the Pope issued him a death sentence for his crimes, but he died in exile of a fever when he was 38. They think it was a combination of lead poisoning from the paint he used, syphilis, and an infected sword wound."

"Jesus fucking Christ," James breathed out. "He was a terror."

Regulus hummed, already pulling James to another painting. "A terror, but a great artist. He changed the art historical canon forever. Oh look, they have an Eva Hesse work here. Phenomenal artist."

They continued on this way until the museum closed and they were forced to leave. Regulus hadn't even made it through half of the paintings he wanted to see, but James was disappointed that he no longer got to witness Regulus' excitement and admiration for almost

every painting and artist. James loved watching Regulus lose himself in his passions– James just loved watching Regulus in general.

In the car, Regulus rolled the windows down slightly and let the cool evening air pour in. He turned the music up and James couldn't help but laugh as both their hair whipped around them in the wind. He didn't think Regulus had ever been so unrestrained.

His head was still hazy with everything that Regulus had told him earlier. Regulus' life had been anything but easy. It was astounding to James that someone who had known so little kindness, so little comfort and joy could still sit in the driver's seat of the car smiling and humming softly to himself, tapping his fingers contently on the steering wheel. Regulus always said he wasn't brave, but there was a bravery in that act alone. Getting up and facing each day and finding joy in the little things like art and Tchaikovsky when the whole world seemed jaded. He didn't even need to borrow any bravery from James or anyone else, he had that kind of bravery all on his own.

James would look out the window and the rolling scenery and kiss Regulus every time the car came to a stop. Sometimes he would pull one of his hands up to his lips or he would lean over and kiss his cheek. He couldn't help himself. He rested his hand on Regulus' leg. He just wanted to be close to him. He was making up for lost time. Lost time when he would knock on Regulus' door but not come in, not touch him. Lost time when he would sit across from him and drink tea but not hug him. He was sure these slight touches were adding to Regulus' reckless driving, but it wasn't a large enough deterrent to get him to stop.

"Thank you," James whispered looking over at Regulus. "For telling me everything today. I know it wasn't easy."

Regulus let out a strangled noise in the back of his throat. For a moment James was worried that he had hurt him somehow with his words. The trees rushed past them outside in green blurs.

"I tell you everything I've done and you forgive me anyway and you're the one thanking me," Regulus whispered gulping. "I don't deserve you. I still can't believe you're even real and here, in my life."

"You're not a bad person Regulus. Maybe you've done some bad things but you deserve love, you always deserve to be loved." James reached over and pulled Regulus' hand from the steering wheel. Gently, he kissed the inside of his wrist and then the palm of his hand as if he could press these truths right into Regulus to make him believe them, before pulling Regulus' hand to rest on his cheek. James swore he could melt under his touch. "And I just think you're splendid."

"James," Regulus sighed, his eyes darting quickly over to James before returning to the road. "I will crash this fucking car." His voice came out wavering and light.

James let go of Regulus' hand so he could return to driving with both of them on the wheel and grinned. "But what a way to go, am I right?"

Regulus just shook his head.

They kept driving and James traced patterns on Regulus' leg, teasing him. He loved hearing the way Regulus' breath hitched when he inched higher or the sighs he let out when James would squeeze slightly or graze his fingers along the inside of his thigh. He loved the way Regulus would shudder under his touch or the way he would bite his lip, trying to ignore James. James loved the idea that he could drive Regulus just as crazy as Regulus drove him.

Then, before he knew it, they were close to the house, but instead of pulling into the driveway, Regulus drove past it slightly and pulled off to the side of the road before he stopped the car. They were on a small dirt side road hidden from the view of the house. Regulus turned the car off and unbuckled his seat belt.

"Regulus what are you–" but James couldn't finish, because Regulus had scrambled from the driver's seat over the centre console and into James' lap, kissing him with a sudden urgency.

James tried to shift in his seat making it more comfortable for Regulus. He moved the seat back so that Regulus could have more room as he began his soft assailing kisses.

James wrapped his arms around Regulus, partially to support him in the cramped position of the car passenger seat and partially to pull him closer. Why did it always seem as if they could never be close enough? James held him tight against himself.

Gently, Regulus took off James' glasses and placed them on the empty driver's seat, before returning his mouth to James'. His lips were soft and he deepened the kiss, sending James' mind into a dizzying frenzy. He moved his hands under Regulus' shirt to the small of his back and groaned at the whimper Regulus let out at the contact. They stayed that way for a while, both of them hardly daring to break away to come up for air.

"James," Regulus whispered when James had finally pulled away to begin kissing down his neck. "You can't fucking touch me like that and say pretty things to me and not expect me to not jump your bones."

James let out a laugh against the crook of Regulus' neck, feeling warmth spread throughout his entire body. "And what about you hmm?" he hummed against Regulus' ear as Regulus began pulling lightly at the roots of his hair causing him to gasp. "Telling me I'm magic, what am I supposed to do with that Regulus?"

Regulus began rolling his hips slightly, down onto James' and he forgot for a moment how words worked at all. God, he had missed this.

"You are magic James. Everything about you is otherworldly," Regulus was still moving against James and breathing heavily as James began nipping at his jawline. "It's the only explanation."

James let out a loud moan, letting Regulus' words burn through him, letting them flood his senses.

"Magic," Regulus panted, kissing him again. "You're fucking magic."

James needed this, he needed Regulus with him forever. He had no idea how he'd managed to go so long without him.

James moved his hands down to the button on Regulus' trousers, but Regulus stopped him, grabbing his hands.

"We can't James. Not here. Isn't it illegal to have sex in public like this?"

James let out a loud laugh. "Are you really," he laughed again at the look on Regulus' face. "Now you're suddenly concerned about legality? Now?"

Regulus leaned in and kissed him again, but gave a slightly annoyed huff.

"Besides, this is hardly public," James continued looking around at the empty road as Regulus clasped their hands together, entwining their fingers.

Regulus moved to kiss the side of James' neck. "I have to meet with Barty and Evan at seven," he whispered.

"Well I hate to tell you this but it's 6:59 right now," James strained to read his watch. It was incredibly blurry.

"What?" Regulus sat up quickly, hitting his head on the roof of the car and swearing. He grabbed James' hand to look at his watch while rubbing his head with his other hand and cursed again. Quickly he tossed James his glasses before scrambling back into the driver's seat and turning the engine on.

James should've just kept his mouth closed. He fumbled to put his glasses back on as Regulus began driving back towards the house.

"Don't do this to me Regulus," James rumbled lowly. "Please, tell Barty and Evan to fuck off for a little while."

"I'm sorry," Regulus whispered smiling as he pulled into the driveway. "I have to meet with them. Just, come to my room tonight and I'll make it up to you."

"Oh I will," James nodded his mind still swimming in thoughts of Regulus. "In the meantime, while you're in your meeting with Evan and Barty, I'm going to go back to my room and I'm going to touch myself thinking about the way your tongue feels in my mouth," James began lowly. "The way you move your hips against mine. I'm going to think about the noises you make when you–"

Regulus had dropped his head on the steering wheel letting out a small yelp when the car horn honked as James laughed.

Regulus looked at him, blushing profusely. "You don't even want to know the things you do to me, James Potter."

"Oh," James murmured, feeling cocky at Regulus' state. He traced his thumb lightly over Regulus' jaw and up to his bottom lip. "But I think I do."

“Get out of my car,” Regulus groaned. “Go.” He shot his eyes towards the back door. “I have somewhere to be and you’re making it very difficult to move or think or breathe.”

“You were the one who wanted to jump my bones, remember? I’m not the one who pulled off on the side of the road to crawl in your lap,” James smirked.

“The bone jumping felt mutual,” Regulus huffed, his eyes wide.

“You’re not going to follow me in,” James asked, finally stepping out of the car seeing that Regulus hadn’t made a move to get up. “You’re already late.”

“Yeah well I’m going to need a minute more,” Regulus glared but he was blushing. He cast a brief glance at his tented trousers and James grinned widely. “I can’t walk in there like this now can I?”

“Tonight Regulus Black,” James shook his head, closing the car door. “I’m going to rock your world.” Then he turned and walked back into the house, but not before casting several glances back at Regulus who was smiling softly back at him.

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“I told him I’m going to do it. I told him I’m going to work on the heist,” Sirius stormed into the library pacing back and forth rapidly.

Remus carefully marked his page in his book and looked up. “Is that what you want to do?”

“No. Yes. Maybe, I don’t know,” Sirius huffed, still pacing. “I think maybe I do.”

Things were confusing between Remus and Sirius. Remus was wholeheartedly in love with Sirius, and he knew Sirius loved him, but Sirius was so stubborn. He needed time to lick his wounds, but Remus was nothing if not persistent.

The odd thing was that they were still speaking. Remus would speak to Sirius every day, smile at him, tell him a joke, talk as if nothing were wrong. Little by little it was getting to Sirius, he could tell. Sirius went from trying to ignore him to engaging in conversation to seeking Remus out first. It was easier to love each other than to be mad at one another, at least that’s how Remus felt, he was fairly certain Sirius felt the same way too, he was just better at hiding it.

Now they were at a place where they were speaking almost as friends. Though the tension was thick. Remus would like to think it was mainly sexual tension, as he’d almost kissed Sirius more than a few times and he could swear Sirius had almost done the same, but sometimes Sirius would like to pick at the scab, trying to start a fight and then tension of another kind would ensue.

“I’m actually excited about it. I’ve seen the plans and they’re…thrilling Remus. Does that make me insane?”

Sirius looked so good. He was in an all-black ensemble that really, *really* worked for him. He looked like a rockstar. It was driving him insane.

Remus blinked in surprise once Sirius' words registered in his brain. "Regulus let you see the heist plans? Did I hear that right?"

"Yeah," Sirius nodded vehemently. "We're trying to…we're trying to be better than we were before I guess. Work towards something."

"Well, I think that's great," Remus offered him a small reassuring smile. He had a million questions, but he figured now wasn't the time.

"Hmmm," Sirius crossed his arms, not really listening. "Does it make me insane for actually being excited about the heist?"

"Not unless it makes all of us insane," Remus supplied shrugging. "Sometimes I think you're too hard on yourself." He added the last part in a quieter tone.

"Why," Sirius quipped. "Because I'm hesitant to commit crimes? Because I realise what we're doing is wrong?"

"No," Remus said slowly, attempting to de-escalate Sirius' rising temper. "You put so much pressure on yourself to be the exact opposite of who your family is, sometimes I think you're still suppressing a little bit of who you are. If you share excitement for the heist it doesn't make you a bad person, and you don't have to let the guilt consume you. It doesn't make you a carbon copy of them, you're still you, Sirius."

Sirius seemed to soften slightly at this and he unclenched his jaw. "I just worked so hard to put all this distance between them and myself, you know? I wanted to be the furthest thing from them as possible, but I think you're right. I lost a lot of things in the process." Sirius had stopped pacing and was looking at the floor by his feet. His voice was much softer. "I had to give up things I loved. Granted, I shouldn't have loved them, things like the art of the steal, but I did love them. I couldn't help it. And I lost a brother in the process of creating that distance, a brother I never wanted to lose."

Remus nodded carefully, his gaze not leaving Sirius'. Sirius was being open about himself, about his family. He was no longer keeping them hidden away in the shadows, he was no longer lying about them. He had been opening up to Remus a little the last week or so, and every time Remus would offer a listening ear and his advice if Sirius wanted it. It brought him comfort to know that he was the person Sirius went to.

"I don't think you've lost Regulus, Sirius. He cares about you, a lot you know," Remus murmured.

Sirius bristled slightly. "Oh, what? Now you're defending him?"

Remus shrugged, unflinching under Sirius' hard stare. "He told me he didn't want me dead, that he wanted to rebalance the scales. He also told me that all he really wanted was to have you here. For what it's worth, I think he's trying to fix things. He just didn't sound like someone you lost that's all."

“Oh,” Sirius’ voice came out small and when he looked back up, Remus could see his eyes were welling with tears. “Shit sorry,” Sirius blinked, looking up at the ceiling. He paused for a moment, his eyes darting back and forth in thought “You know what he told me? He told me that he was fine with it if I wanted to start dating you again.”

Remus’ mouth went dry at that confession and his heart began to beat quicker with joy. Sirius’ tone of voice seemed uncertain, as if he were testing the waters, as he cast a sidelong look at Remus.

“He said that? Sirius, he actually said that?” Remus stood up to cross the room over to Sirius. Gingerly, he uncrossed Sirius’ arms staring at him with all the hope he felt. Every nerve lighting up at being so close to him.

“Yeah,” Sirius croaked looking pale. “He said since we were already complicated or whatever, and now that I’m on the heist, if we started dating again, he wouldn’t stop it.”

Remus nodded thinking quickly. They were rapidly approaching the same page. Sirius on the heist, Regulus’ approval. Now the only thing standing in their way was Sirius and his stubbornness. He was trying to find a way to approach this carefully, to break down Sirius’ walls that he built up so high around himself.

“Sirius,” Remus breathed, still standing close to him.

“Remus,” Sirius responded, closing his eyes.

“Don’t be mad anymore,” Remus began pleading. He had only pleaded like this twice with Sirius, each time, not caring how desperate he sounded. “Don’t be mad. Forgive me and let’s start over. Let’s really start over.” They were so close their foreheads were almost touching. Sirius’ hair fell in his face slightly and Remus had to do all that he could to not brush it out of his eyes. “Do you still love me like you said? Did you mean it?”

And Sirius nodded.

“Because I love you. I’m just as crazy about you as ever. If you’re working towards something with your brother, work towards something with me too. Let’s be happy, let’s start over.”

Several moments of silence passed between them. Neither of them pulled away. Remus knew Sirius wanted this just as badly as he did, he knew he wanted to be with him, he just had to do it. He just had to trust him one more time.

“Yeah,” Sirius croaked softly. “Yeah okay.”

“What,” Remus gasped as Sirius wrapped his arms around him, pulling him close. Remus leaned into his grasp.

“I can’t be mad at you Moony. Hell, even when I was you were still there for me, still talking to me. It wasn’t fair for me to put so much on you either. You didn’t know.”

Remus shook his head, resting his chin on the top of Sirius' head. The nickname still ringing in his ears. "I didn't know."

"We both lied," Sirius whispered into his chest. "I'm sorry about that," he said into Remus' chest.

"Yeah me too, but that's behind us now yeah?"

And he felt Sirius nod against him.

"I'll never hurt you like that again Sirius, I promise I won't," Remus kissed the top of his head.

"I do love you, Remus. I don't know how I know, but I just do," Sirius let out a little sigh.

Remus tilted Sirius' chin up tenderly with his fingers and kissed him softly. "I feel the same way," he said quietly, letting the relief rush over him.

He knew what Sirius meant. Ever since that day in the museum, he felt drawn to Sirius. Like he had finally found something that he didn't even know he was searching for. They were destined to be together, fate. He didn't know how he knew either, he just did.

"Oh thank God."

A voice coming from the entrance to the library made them both jump.

"Lily," Remus broke away from Sirius in surprise. "You can't fucking sneak up on people like that! How long have you been standing there?" She was leaning up against the doorframe with her arms crossed.

Lily shrugged smiling lightly. "Just long enough to make sure you two sorted everything out properly. I couldn't have you getting derailed again. I'm so sick of watching you two eye fuck each other at the breakfast table and then not do anything about it."

Sirius laughed as Remus gasped at her words.

"I'll have you know I was glaring at him, Lily. I was sending daggers his way," Sirius shook his head. "I was letting everyone know how mad I was."

"Whatever helps you sleep at night, sure," Lily shook her head before casting a genuine smile at Remus. "I'll just see myself out now." She let out a light sigh before bounding off.

When Remus was sure she had left, he kissed Sirius again deeper and needier, finally pushing the hair out of his face. He knew they still had to talk properly about a lot of things, but that could wait for now. For now, he just wanted Sirius.

"Can we go to your room?" Sirius murmured against his lips.

"Yeah," Remus nodded quickly already dragging him out by the hand. "God, fuck yeah."

His mind was completely consumed with Sirius Black. As he led him up the stairs he knew they would have to talk about the heist, about Sirius' decision to fall in line, about what it would look like if they were working together. He knew they should also talk about their relationship in more detail and discuss things with more clarity but Remus wasn't worried. He knew they would work through all of it. He could feel it in his bones, the inevitability of them, and he leaned into it, trusting in their predestined nature.

Chapter End Notes

I love you all, next chapter will be more interesting promise! mwah <3

remus: be who u are it's okay <3
sirius: yeah but what if who i am is actually an art thief and criminal mastermind?
remus: yeah well,,,,,that's hot

Chapter 24: Happy Days

Chapter Summary

James light of my life Potter. Mwah !

Chapter Notes

i do believe in vietnamese iced coffee supremacy! this chapter is sponsored by vietnamese iced coffee

tw: Sexual content. right at the beginning. this is your warning. ur just kind of thrown in there. Sorry. It's short though. Mentions of gun violence and some implied childhood abuse.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"James, fuck. Fuck James," Regulus was writhing underneath him simultaneously trying to push him away and pull him closer. His nails were running down the muscles of James' back, scratching and digging into his skin.

James continued his pace, thrusting mercilessly into Regulus with soft grunts, though he was starting to falter slightly. "Shh, love. You have to be quiet, people will hear."

The term of endearment ripped another loud moan from Regulus and James leaned down to kiss him in order to keep him quiet.

They were under the sheets, contributing to the heat of their bodies and a light film of sweat coated them both. Every time he was with James, Regulus was certain he had never felt so good. He felt as if his body couldn't contain all the pleasure and joy and he knew at any moment he would dissolve into a million little pieces and float away.

"You're so perfect Regulus, fuck. You're so fucking beautiful," James was whispering languidly with each thrust. "You're a star. You're my star."

And God, Regulus wanted to belong to James. He would be his star. He would be James' anything.

He buried his face into the side of James' neck to try and keep quiet, releasing his strings of whimpers and babblings there. He wrapped his arms around James tightly, holding on with all his might as James came with a few final thrusts.

Panting and in a state of bliss, James rolled over onto his back. It didn't matter how many times they did this, and ever since the museum it had been as often as possible, each time was better than the last. Every second with James was more perfect than the one before. Regulus didn't know what to do with that, other than lay himself down and allow himself to be pulled into orbit.

It was dark and eventually, Regulus began tracing patterns along James' muscular arms that were wrapped around him protectively. It was one of his favourite things to do, tracing his fingers anywhere along James. His favourite spot was to outline the antler tattoo James had on his thigh. He could spend hours and hours just going over it with his index finger.

He listened to James' steady breathing and felt the rise and fall of his chest with every inhale and exhale. Regulus had been to a lot of places in his lifetime. He'd seen the Eiffel Tower and the Louvre. He had walked the Colosseum and taken a Gondola through the Venice canals. He'd been to castles and Michelin-star restaurants and decadent art museums and libraries stacked floor to ceiling with books but none of them compared to this. This was his favourite place he had ever been, in James Potter's arms. He was certain that nothing would ever be able to compare.

"Reg," James rasped, his voice slow with sleep, pulling him from his thoughts.

"Hmm," Regulus hummed contentedly, still tracing patterns. He decided to let the nickname slide. He didn't mind as much when it was James who said it.

"Are we…am I your boyfriend? Are we dating?"

Regulus' first instinct was to laugh, it seemed a little comical to him the nature of the question. However, the tone of James' voice made him suppress it, and he felt his heartbeat pick up. James sounded uncertain and quieter. Truthfully, Regulus hadn't really thought about what they were. It was always so clear to him in his mind, he never questioned it even if he was too afraid to say anything out loud.

But it was easier, to be honest in the dark, where he couldn't see James and where James couldn't see him. Maybe it was that, or maybe it was James' arms wrapped around him so strong and unfaltering and comforting, but Regulus found himself whispering the truth. "There is no one else for me James. It's only you."

The words were ripped from him before he could think about their impact. The strange thing was, they didn't come from the part of him where he usually hid things. They weren't buried in a box collecting dust in some deep, dark corner of his brain. They were always there, in his heart, waiting to be found, waiting to be called forward.

"Oh," James' voice came out strangled. He squeezed his arms around Regulus a little tighter as if he were some precious thing that would slip away from him at any minute. "Yeah, I feel the same way." He kissed the back of Regulus' head.

"I'll be your boyfriend James. I'll be anything you want me to be if it'll make you happy." Regulus was speaking but his lips were barely moving. It wasn't as terrifying, being honest

with James, but it still made him nervous. He suppressed the urge to squirm out of his arms, to hide away. He was trying to be better.

James made a soft noise. “But what will make *you* happy, Regulus?”

Regulus didn't even have to think about it.

“You,” he whispered into the dark. “You make me happy.”

It was so simple; James was it for him. It was that easy.

James flipped Regulus over so that he was facing him and began peppering Regulus’ face with kisses in the dark.

“So we’re official?” Kiss. “You’re my boyfriend?” Kiss. Kiss. “How did I get so lucky?” Kiss. “Regulus Black is my boyfriend?” Kiss. Kiss. Kiss. “You make me happy.” Kiss. “Indescribably so.” Kiss. “Never speak again.” Kiss. Kiss. “I can’t fucking take it.” Kiss. “I’m so lucky.” Kiss.

Regulus was only aware he was smiling because his cheeks began to hurt. “James stop,” he whispered, his eyes crinkled closed. “I’m the lucky one, it's me. It’s me,” he sighed breathlessly.

James was on him in a second, deepening the kiss.

They stayed that way until the sun started to peak above the horizon and James pulled him close again. It was nice to be held, it was nice to feel safe in more than the literal sense of the word. When Regulus was like this, when he was with James, he imagined all kinds of crazy things for the future. Most of them revolved around James and his plans for after the heist. Most of anything Regulus thought about these days revolved around James. That’s what he gets, he supposed, for falling for the sun. It was only natural.

“Tell me about Brazil,” Regulus murmured sleepily. The rising sun was casting long shadows throughout the room. He was here, in this position before, but now he was ready to listen. Now he was ready to believe, even if it made him foolish.

“Hmm,” James sighed into his hair. “I’m afraid the plans have gotten a great deal more spectacular since the last time we talked about it,” James rasped through his tiredness. “I’m buying a house there, somewhere secluded and away from people, but close enough to town that it’s not far from whatever we need. And I still want to be close to the ocean but I also want to be in the greenery of the mountains. I haven’t really sorted out that issue yet but…”

We. What we need.

In all the possibilities that life brought, Regulus found himself living in the one in which James Potter was planning a future that included him in it. A house in Brazil where Regulus could do this every night with James, and he let himself believe in it. It was terrifying and exhilarating at the same time. Maybe he would feel differently in the full light of morning, every day he kept waiting to feel differently, but he never did. Maybe it made him foolish,

maybe it made him pathetic to latch on to James like this, to believe that something so wonderful could happen to him, but he didn't care. He was thankful for the semi-darkness as he felt a small tear roll down the side of his cheek. He wasn't even entirely sure why he was crying.

James was still going on, “and I want the house to have red shutters. Red shutters so you know immediately that it’s ours from the street-”

There it was again. *Ours.*

“-Not red,” Regulus found himself interrupting. “The house should have green shutters. I think green would look nice with the mountain or ocean view. The colours would compliment.”

Regulus had closed his eyes, partially to keep himself from letting another tear slip out and partially to imagine what this house would even look like.

“But red is my favourite colour,” James tutted.

“But green is my favourite colour and if I’m going to be living there as well, then I think they should be green.”

James froze slightly, and a few beats of silence passed between them. “You-you really… you’re going to live there with me,” James breathed out in disbelief.

“Oh, um– I just thought because you kept saying w-we and ours I-I just assumed,” Regulus felt panicky.

“No, no of course that’s what I meant,” James kissed the back of his head quickly in an attempt to reassure him. “Of course that’s what I meant. I’ve just never heard you talk about it before, that's all,” he added softly.

“Talk about what?”

“Us, in the future.”

“Oh,” Regulus nodded in acknowledgement. “Well when *we* go to Brazil, I want green shutters,” he sighed, trying to be as certain as James was about everything, even though his heart felt as if it were about to beat right out of his chest.

James let out a small laugh that still managed to fill the entire room with light. “Let’s compromise then. We’ll paint one side red and the other side green and we’ll both be happy.”

“Our house will look like fucking Christmas all year round,” Regulus shook his head grumbling. "We'll be the Christmas shutter house."

“Hmmm,” James hummed sleepily. “It’s a good thing that Christmas is my favourite holiday then. Christmas all year round. Can you imagine the joy?”

—---

James wasn't sure when he had fallen asleep; all he knew was that one moment he was thinking of Brazil, and the next Regulus' cold hands were on him, shaking him awake.

"James, I'm getting desperate enough to pour water on you come on," Regulus' soft voice lulled his eyes open.

"Don't, don't," James groaned sitting up. "I'm up, I'm up. Jesus, you're hands are like icicles."

"Poor blood circulation is part of my charm," Regulus answered flatly, throwing James his shirt. "You've got to go."

Slowly, James ambled up before giving Regulus a parting kiss. As quietly as he could, he meandered through the house with his eyes still half closed until he managed to get upstairs and into his room. He opened the door and wiped the sleep out of his eyes before freezing.

"Good morning James," Remus sat on his bed with his eyebrows raised, giving him a pointed look.

"Remus, hey," James did his best to close his gaping mouth and hide his shocked expression. "You're here early. In my room. Which you never do. You're in my room."

"Yeah, and you were not in your room. Care to explain?" He was still looking at James suspiciously, but his posture was very relaxed sitting against the headboard of James' bed. "And before you tell me something like you were in the kitchen or for a walk, I came by last night to talk to you and you weren't here. You clearly haven't slept here, so I would proceed with caution."

James' breath caught in his throat. He couldn't lie to Remus, but he couldn't say anything without talking to Regulus first. Either way, neither Remus nor Regulus wouldn't be too happy for James to tell the truth, but he also couldn't bring himself to lie so blatantly. He felt trapped.

"Oh, what did you come to talk to me about? Is everything alright?" James did his best to deflect, scratching the back of his head with a feigned air of nonchalance.

Remus shot him a look that let him know he wasn't buying into the distraction and James let out a puff of air.

"Remus," he began carefully. "I think you already know." James bit his lip in anticipation. He waited for Remus' wrath, for his questions, for his fury, but instead, he just blinked slowly. "He's my boyfriend," James continued in Remus' silence. "Well, as of last night he is." Even then, James couldn't help the small smile on his face at the words.

"Oh," Remus let out a small breath. "You just made it official recently. Okay. That's good. Good." Something seemed to shift in his stare. "Wait…boyfriend? James fucking Fleamont Potter. Tell me you're fucking kidding me right now."

Remus didn't seem angry. He just seemed to be in a state of disbelief. James would say that he was even fighting a smile of incredulity.

"Well," James felt himself blushing.

"You got the scariest motherfucker in the world to fall in love with *you* ? You cry at weddings! And movies with dogs in them!"

"Shh! Remus, keep your voice down," James cut in quickly.

"You need to start speaking right now," Remus' eyes were still wide but James was comforted by the fact that he didn't seem upset. Granted, Remus thought that whatever happened between Regulus and himself just started, but what he didn't know wouldn't hurt him. For now. After the heist, he would tell him everything, but for now, while they lived in the same house, James decided to play it safe. He decided to leave out any of the rule-breaking up until the forgiveness part at the museum.

"Well, you were right, what you said at the picnic. The way he looked at me when I laughed," James began closing the door and flopping down on the bed beside Remus. He was so incredibly tired, he had hardly slept, but he'd wanted to talk to Remus about this forever and part of him was excited as well. "I want you to know that I forgave him. But I wouldn't have forgiven him if you hadn't said anything, Remus. It's important to me that you know that I would never do anything like that if I didn't know you were okay with it."

Remus nodded and urged him along in the story. James told him all about going to his room at night, making sure to leave a few key parts out. He made it sound more friendly than anything. He told him about the portrait date and the auction and the museum but left out the parts where he showed up drunk at Regulus' door, or the nights he slept in Regulus' bed, or the secret kisses they would share in the hallway on the third floor when no one was around. But once he got to the museum, he told Remus the complete truth. He left out the specifics that Regulus told him about his family and his past, he would never betray Regulus like that, but he told Remus the gist of everything else.

As he was talking, he was very careful with what he was revealing. He trusted Remus completely but he also recognised the hypocrisy in the entire situation. The last thing he needed was Remus yelling at Regulus or telling Sirius, not when things were going so well. Maybe that wasn't fair. No, he was sure it wasn't fair, but even so, he was happy with revealing all that he had. It felt good, right.

Remus just sat in silence for a while after James had relayed everything to him. James held his breath in anticipation. Given that Remus had given his approval at the picnic, he wasn't entirely sure what to expect.

"And you're…happy," Remus said quietly after what felt like years.

James nodded vehemently.

"You're fucking crazy," Remus let a laugh bubble out of him. And then that laugh turned into a spurt of giggles as James followed suit. "I can't believe you did it."

“I honestly can’t either,” James shook his head. “You’re not mad,” he asked after his laughter subsided. “Really, Remus? I would understand if you were.”

“No,” Remus blinked calmly. “Honestly,” he took a deep breath in, “I kind of suspected you were doing something behind the scenes when Sirius came to me and said that Regulus was okay with us being together.”

“What,” James choked sitting up. “He what?”

“Yeah,” Remus nodded cracking a grin. “That’s actually what I wanted to talk to you about. Because Sirius and I are…good. We’re starting over or something I don’t know. But he’s been in my room every single night. And I’ve been very preoccupied with him so I haven’t talked to you about anything yet. But yeah. Anyway, I just figured you had something to do with Regulus' approval so.”

Now it was James' turn to be surprised, but he also felt a spark of joy for his friend. “This is fucking matchmaking central. You and Sirius and me and Regulus and Marlene and Dorcas… what the fuck,” James breathed out. “I guess that’s what happens when everyone is hot.”

Remus let out a snort.

“Well, now it’s your turn. Tell me everything,” James prompted with wide eyes. He listened as Remus filled him in on everything that he had missed with Sirius.

“And you trust him,” James prompted when Remus was done.

“Yeah,” Remus said firmly. “I do. And I think, from what I know, that Regulus is trying to trust him too. So I see no reason for me not to.”

James nodded.

“Anyway, now that we know that Regulus isn’t going to stand in our way, we’re going to go public. Sirius is going to talk to Regulus about it tomorrow and ask him to address it to the group so we stop getting weird stares when we snog in the hallway you know?”

“Oh,” James nodded again. “Okay sure.”

“Do you think that will go over…well with him?” Remus asked quietly.

James thought for a moment. “I’m sure it will be fine,” he answered decidedly. “I’ll help if I can.”

Remus gave him a look of relief. “Look at us,” he grinned. “Who would’ve thought? The Black brothers.”

“We’re in,” James mirrored his grin.

“We’re in, baby,” Remus echoed.

James and Remus talked and laughed some more before it was time to head down to breakfast. All day during class, Remus couldn't stop looking at Regulus and James and James couldn't help but watch every interaction between Sirius and Remus. Neither of them could be any more obvious and every time they made eye contact with each other, they would burst into laughter, much to the annoyance of Regulus who was lecturing them all on the importance of memorising pre-established car routes to avoid or throw off police in the event of a chase.

Two days later, James found himself sitting on Regulus' bed as Regulus paced back and forth through his room.

"I mean he wants me to go public for them. To tell everyone that I approve," Regulus muttered. "He wants me to publicly give my blessing. But James how can I do that without looking like a total hypocrite? I'm worried that this will just open the floodgates."

"I think calling another meeting would be a good idea. You could get everything out there, clear the air, work with Sirius and.." he trailed off trying to decide if he should approach this with Regulus at all. "You can tell them about us at the same time. Lessen the impact."

"James–"

"I'm just saying if you're already going to be a hypocrite we could just get the whole thing over with at once, and then I won't have to sneak out here at the crack of dawn every morning. And maybe you could fucking smile at me in class sometime. I don't know," James began quickly. "It would just be nice if everything didn't have to be such a secret all the time, that's all," he murmured quietly, staring at his lap.

Regulus stopped his pacing and stared at James. He was debating something with himself; James could see the wheels turning in his mind.

"They'll riot," Regulus shook his head at last. "I'll lose all credibility."

"No, you won't. Remus won't riot," James tried to assure him.

"How do you know that for sure? How can you guarantee something like that?"

James coughed uncomfortably. "He might…already know. And he's totally fine with it!"

Regulus' eyes flashed with anger.

"I didn't tell him on purpose, he just caught me sneaking back into my room and I only told him the bare minimum he only thinks we just started seeing each other. I told him it just started after the museum and he wasn't even mad. I think if we frame it right, Regulus, we can just…be. Wouldn't that be nice?"

Regulus was still staring at him harshly.

"And Barty and Evan would do anything for you. They'd back you up. And Remus can sway Sirius. Peter probably won't do anything and neither will Marlene and Dorcas, you can trust me on that. So," James trailed off as Regulus let out a deep sigh.

“You need to tell me what you told Remus, verbatim,” Regulus began, and James did. He recounted the earlier conversation he had with Remus as Regulus listened carefully.

“I just think that…I want to be with you, Regulus. Every second of every day and I don’t want to wait for the heist to be over. I can’t wait. Just call the meeting and let me love you, out loud, right now and every day. And if the others can’t get behind that, then fuck them, you know? Fuck them.”

James got up and wrapped his arms around Regulus, kissing the crease that had formed in between Regulus’ eyebrows. He kissed Regulus’ cheek and then his other cheek.

“You’re Regulus Black. This will be nothing for you, and I’ll be there the whole time. Just get everything out there.”

He kissed Regulus’ nose and then his lips.

“You’re not playing fair,” Regulus murmured, leaning into James.

“Just consider it.”

“This is really what you want,” Regulus sighed, pulling away. He was looking at him with round eyes.

James could see the nervousness there, the fear and trepidation peeking through. “I–”

But Regulus nodded before he could finish. “Consider it done. I’ll call the meeting tomorrow.”

“Okay, but Regulus if–”

“James,” he held up his hand. “Just– I can do this. It’s fine.”

“Oh, okay,” James said softly. He wasn’t sure what to do. Regulus seemed strained and slightly agitated. He wished Regulus would tell him what he was thinking. Maybe he could help ease his mind, but he could tell Regulus was receding inwards. The tide was pulling back.

James did think this was for the best. It was always best to have everything out in the open, as much as you could. If anyone gave Regulus shit, they would have him to deal with.

Regulus sighed getting into bed before looking at James expectantly, and really that was all he needed. He went around and turned out the lights before climbing into bed after him. Regulus rolled over so he was facing him and took a few calming breaths.

James thought he had fallen asleep when he heard Regulus' soft voice. “I’m scared, James,” he whispered into the dark.

“Don’t be, love,” James pulled him closer. “It’ll work out. It’ll all work out. And tomorrow, if you get there, and you want to back out, that’s fine. It’ll be okay. You don’t have to do it,” he

said, running his fingers through Regulus' hair soothingly. "Or I'll say it. Or anything you want."

"Okay," Regulus whispered back in a small voice. "Thank you. Okay."

The next day, James was on edge all the way until after class when Regulus called everyone down to the kitchen for a meeting. He noted the nervous glances people cast towards Evan and Barty but they appeared just as confused as the rest of them. Everyone entered the room sombre and with anxious expressions. A collective feeling of deja vu clouded over them. James was thankful that he wasn't going into this blindly.

After the last person had sat down, Regulus cleared his throat loudly and everyone stared at him with curious and tepid expressions as he stood up at the head of the table. James' breathing became slightly uneven, but he tried to give Regulus an encouraging look.

"I called another meeting here this afternoon to make an announcement," he looked around the table at everyone.

James didn't think he looked nervous, but he knew he must be. He glanced at Regulus' hands, but they were steady.

"When you first signed on to do this job I had a list of rules. Rules that you all have seen me enforce rather…strictly. But I'm not an idiot, and I know you're all breaking them left and right anyway," he sighed as nervous glances were cast around the table. Sirius sat up a little straighter. "The rule about no relationships between members of the team is…the reason I had this rule was because relationships complicate things. They make things difficult if you split up or have a fight. Your mind gets clouded with emotions and I need this to go perfectly. I don't need outside unmitigated factors like feelings influencing the outcome of this heist. Is that clear?"

Everyone nodded quickly. The tension in the room was thick and James began bouncing his leg nervously.

"That being said, if you're going to break the rules and date anyway, I'd rather know about it than have it kept hidden from me so I can… anticipate things moving forward, and I'd also rather it be someone on the team instead of someone in the outside world," Regulus cast a pointed look towards Remus. "At least then I'm not worried about a breach of information."

"So are you saying that," Lily began with her eyebrows scrunched up in contemplation.

"Remus and I are dating and he is my boyfriend and we are in love," Sirius called out from the end of the table with a dramatic sweeping motion, unable to contain himself.

"And Regulus knows and he's okay with it," Remus added, blushing lightly. He sunk down a little lower in his chair.

"Really, fuck I never would've guessed," Barty rolled his eyes at Sirius.

“It’s not exactly like you were trying to hide it. You were snogging in the library like yesterday,” Evan added.

Peter cast a worried look at Regulus.

“Wait, so you mean to tell me that you had Evan and Barty here point a gun at Remus and now you’re just okay with them dating?” Mary scoffed, crossing her arms. “We’re just moving past that whole ordeal?”

“Now we’re all on the same side,” Regulus explained calmly. “Sirius is actively working with us. They were already complicated to begin with–”

“So you can just change the rules whenever you want,” Mary interrupted raising her eyebrows.

“Jesus, thanks for the support,” Sirius mumbled.

“Well, I’m just saying that–”

“Yes, I can change the rules,” Regulus breathed out shortly. “I mean it’s not exactly like they would follow them anyway.”

“No, I do what I want,” Sirius smirked jutting his chin out as Regulus cast a warning glance his way. “And I just want you all to know that I will be snogging my *boyfriend* , Remus Lupin, all the time now thank you very much.”

Remus closed his eyes tightly, still a light shade of pink.

“Well if we’re all in the habit of confessing things, Dorcas and I are very much together as well. We’re getting married in Italy,” Marlene jumped in. "Since this is the new and improved cool Regulus."

“What?” A collective gasp went around the table from everyone including Dorcas which made James laugh.

“Does Dorcas know she’s getting married?” Lily snorted.

Regulus looked slightly paler at this confession.

“It’s the first I’m hearing of it,” Dorcas croaked out. “But yeah we are together. Officially we were waiting until after the heist,” she cast an imploring look towards Regulus. “Just so you know.”

“Well I mean, marriage is inevitable,” Marlene declared. “She will be my wife.” Then she looked at Dorcas. “I-I mean if you want to. Obviously. I’m just saying that I’m head over heels for you and I want to marry you and I will propose. This isn’t an official proposal but I do want to marry you if you want to do that,” Marlene began quickly, blushing. “I mean I know we joked about Italy but I wasn’t joking. I mean I was but not if you were serious about the whole thing because–”

“Okay, babe,” Dorcas was fighting a smile. “We can just do this all later yeah?”

Marlene nodded, looking thankful to be interrupted.

Everyone began bursting into light chatter at this confession. Marlene was beaming across the table at Dorcas as Regulus watched the scene play out in front of him.

“Okay,” Regulus continued loudly. “Well,” he cast a glance towards James and he could see how terrified he actually was. He tried to give him a reassuring smile, a nod of encouragement, but he could see Regulus’ hands start to shake slightly. Regulus quickly clasped them behind his back, out of sight.

Everyone fell quiet once again.

James’ heart was beating wildly. *It’s okay Regulus* , he was trying to communicate telepathically to him. *It’s okay you don’t have to tell them.*

“In the name of transparency… James and I are…James and I–”

“No,” Mary gasped before Regulus could finish.

“Ha!” Evan called out loudly, looking overjoyed. “You owe me a hundred pounds,” he grinned at Barty. “What did I fucking tell you, him and pretty boy Potter over here.”

“You fucking couldn’t have kept your mouths shut until after the heist,” Barty groaned. “You fucking sluts,” he wailed in despair.

“That’s not– you shouldn’t say that,” Peter whispered to Barty, shaking his head and frowning.

“James is exactly his type,” Evan jeered gleefully. “I knew the second he walked in and Regulus came out with his fucking earrings and his necklaces on. He was pulling out all the stops!”

“I’m about to be fucking rich anyway,” Barty grumbled. “Soon a hundred pounds will be nothing to me.”

"Why do I feel like my dad just announced that he was dating again," Marlene shuttered.

"Regulus has feelings," Dorcas murmured, more playfully.

James’ eyes were wide as the rest of the table looked between them, all talking over one another.

“So the reason we can all date each other now is because Regulus wanted to fuck James over here that’s great,” Lily shook her head, pointing to Regulus and then James respectively. “So hypocritical.”

“Well technically,” James coughed as Regulus kicked him very sharply under the table.

“No,” Remus spoke up quickly, attempting to talk over everyone. “No, Regulus told me he was okay with me and Sirius before he and James did anything really. So it wasn’t exactly like that. It wasn’t entirely for selfish reasons.” He was doing his best to defend them. “Honestly, I think that this is a nice gesture.”

“One that he benefits from,” Mary cried.

“You and my brother,” Sirius was glancing at James carefully, narrowing his eyes suspiciously. “Moved past a crush rather quickly then.”

Remus nudged Sirius softly. "Can we focus on the new and improved Regulus?" Remus began. "Honestly this doesn't change a lot."

"Speak for yourself," Lily cried, shaking her head.

“Well if we’re all fucking each other now,” Barty flashed a smile at Mary. “What are you doing later tonight MacDonald?”

Mary scrunched up her face in disgust as Evan shoved him harshly before she could even respond.

“Fucking dickhead,” Evan muttered, not looking pleased.

“I’m sorry, can we go back to James and Regulus for a moment? Talk about a mindfuck,” Marlene called out above the ensuing chaos. “I mean we all knew James had this massive crush on you but *you* ,” Marlene cast a disbelieving look at Regulus that made James uneasy.

This wasn’t easy for Regulus, and while he acted like nothing affected him James knew that wasn’t true. “Careful, McKinnon,” James said warningly.

“Unbelievable,” Mary muttered.

The rest of the table broke out into chaos again.

Peter leaned over and clapped James on the shoulder through all the chaos. “Good on you mate. I’m glad you’re happy.”

“Really,” James whispered, thanking the powers above for Peter Pettigrew.

“Honestly, I don’t really think that any of this is my business. Fuck whoever you want, you know?” Peter shrugged.

James blinked a few times to get his bearings. “After this heist, we’re going out for drinks, and I’m going to buy all of yours,” James shook his head.

Peter laughed, “Sounds like a plan.”

“Alright, listen,” Regulus spoke loudly above the noise. “James and I are together. This won’t affect the heist in any capacity. I think I’ve proved that I won’t let *anything* affect the heist.”

He sounded dangerous. His tone was icy cold, and James was reminded of the Regulus he first met before he knew him. “This is my heist. This is my fucking plan. And I’m not compromising it and I’m not giving it up.” He looked briefly at James. “And I’m not giving James up either so if anyone has a *fucking* problem with that,” he slammed his hand down on the table with a loud thud causing several people to jump, “you can take it up with me now.”

His eyes were blazing as they trailed across the table at everyone, daring someone to open their mouth, daring someone to challenge him. His jaw was clenched tightly and he looked lethal. You’d have to have a death wish to speak now. Despite all of this, James was fighting a smile. It was kind of hot to see Regulus act like this over him.

“No one has anything else to add then,” Regulus continued, his voice dripping with venom.

Everyone was silent, though a few people cast Regulus some insolent looks.

“Didn’t fucking think so,” Regulus moved on briskly. “Now that that’s taken care of, is there anything else I should know about regarding team…dynamics?”

Curiously, James could’ve sworn Regulus’ eyes darted between Barty and Evan but neither of them were paying attention.

“Then the meeting is adjourned,” Regulus nodded decidedly. “You all can go,” he waved his hands.

“Actually, I’d like to talk to you,” Sirius looked at James with raised eyebrows.

“Yeah, I think I’d like to talk to you as well,” James responded as people began filing out. Mary and Lily were murmuring quietly to themselves, their heads drawn together.

“Well we need to talk to you,” Barty gestured to him and Evan, also looking at James.

“Barty,” Regulus said warningly.

“What,” Barty grinned. “We’re just gonna talk to him, Jesus.”

“Yeah, no need to freak out. Just a little chat is all,” Evan added, squinting his eyes at James.

“Should I be nervous,” James gave a small, uneasy smile to Regulus.

“No,” Regulus shook his head as Barty and Evan said yes simultaneously.

“Come on pretty boy,” Evan stood up clapping James on the shoulder. “Let’s go outside and have a chat.”

James stood up with Barty, resolving to let whatever was going to happen, happen. He knew Barty, Evan, and Regulus were close. He supposed this was equivalent to meeting Regulus’ parents. James was great with parents. But gun-wielding criminals? That was to be determined.

“Wait I’m fucking coming too. I need to speak with James as well,” Sirius stood up, following behind them quickly.

“Bartemius,” Regulus called out stiffly. “No guns.”

“Don’t even have mine on me, Reggie,” he called back with a grin. “That doesn’t mean anything though,” he whispered turning to James. “My hands work just as well.”

“Should we, uh, talk,” James could hear Remus’ voice carry in from the kitchen.

“About what?” Regulus responded shortly.

“I don’t know, you and my best friend? Me and your brother? You’re kind of scary.”

“Maybe James likes scary,” Regulus shot back, and then James was out of earshot as Barty led him outside.

The sun was beating down on all of them and James used his hand to shield his eyes as he looked at Barty and Evan who stood across from him. Sirius stood off to one side, watching them with his arms crossed.

“So,” Barty began with a drawl. “You and Regulus are officially official?”

James wasn't sure why he felt so nervous. He looked down at the floor and began sweeping one of his feet over the grass and he had to bite his lip to keep from smiling.

“I mean, yeah we are.”

“How many people have you dated before this, James?” Evan eyed him cooly.

“Uh five. Two girls and three boys. But none of them really felt like this though,” James added with round eyes.

“Elaborate on that,” Barty grunted.

“Well,” James looked back and forth between them. This was another interview and one that he needed to pass. “Regulus is– he’s– he’s a star. He’s bright and passionate and he burns white hot and he’s smart. God, he’s so smart and I could listen to him talk forever about books he likes and art. And he makes the best cup of tea and when his eyes light up when laughs, like genuinely laughs, I want to melt right into the floor. He’s breathtaking. He’s exciting. But he’s also methodical and careful and getting to know him over all these months has been singlehandedly the most exhilarating experience of my life,” James was lost for a moment, but the glance between Barty and Evan brought him back.

“What are your intentions with Regulus,” Evan asked, his arms still crossed.

“My… intentions?” James felt as if he were in a bad rom-com movie for a second.

“You heard him. Did he stutter?” Barty quipped. “Answer the question.” They both looked ready to swing on him at any second.

“Um, I intend to be there with him and for him. Every day that he’ll let me. I intend to be a person he can talk to, someone he can trust, someone he can lean on. Yeah,” James nodded, satisfied with that answer. “Oh, and I intend on taking him to Brazil.”

Sirius let out a small yelp and James was reminded that he was standing there. Barty and Evan ignored him entirely. They looked back and forth between one another, speaking with minute facial expressions and then Evan gave Barty a small nod.

“Right, so it goes without saying that we will kill you if you do anything to hurt Regulus. Like, you’re not allowed to break up with him. Ever. He can break up with you, that’s fine, but depending on what you did to make him break up with you, we might still kill you,” Barty began. “Regulus isn’t someone who…he doesn’t do this. He doesn’t open himself up to people like this, and he’s been hurt before,” Barty cast a glare towards Sirius, “by people he’s loved and who were supposed to love him.”

“We think this is a really good thing for him. He's been...good recently,” Evan added. “So if you ruin it by being a secret dickhead or something–”

“I won’t. Trust me, I would never do anything to hurt him,” James began, imploring the both of them.

“Regulus is the only family we have,” Barty said, more softly this time. “We’d do anything for him because he’d do anything for us. We’re brothers.”

Sirius let out a loud cough.

“Fucking shut it Black,” Barty spat with such a venomous tone, it took James aback. “Some of us were there to deal with the fucking fallout you left behind. Some of us had to watch Regulus bear the weight of all your parents' rage made a million times worse after you left. Some of us helped him through the lowest point in his life, scraping him off linoleum floors of bathrooms, cleaning split lips, consoling him while he shook violently for hours– and it wasn’t fucking you, was it?”

Sirius flinched slightly but he didn’t say anything.

“What we’re trying to say,” Evan cut in again. “Is that we won’t hesitate to break every bone in your body if we have to. Clear?”

And James didn’t know what else to do but nod in agreement. There wasn’t a world in which he could fathom hurting Regulus. Sometimes, he felt like his only job was to make sure Regulus was never hurt again, so it was relatively easy to nod along, if unsettling.

“Great,” Evan clapped him on the shoulder smiling. His terrifying, threatening self now replaced with a jovial disposition. “Welcome to the family. You, me, and Barty are about to know each other real well.”

“Yeah,” Barty agreed. “I quite like Brazil, don’t you Evan?”

“Oh yeah. We’ll definitely be joining you two” Evan taunted.

“I’m really glad Regulus has you both,” James blurted, looking and forth between them. And it was true. Whatever bond Regulus, Barty, and Evan had it was strong, and James was glad that they were all there for each other. Maybe it wasn’t perfect, but nothing ever was, and Regulus needed them and they needed him.

Both of them blinked in surprise, and Evan actually shot him a small smile.

“Uh,” Barty coughed awkwardly. “That’s all we really wanted to talk to you about James,” he began heading into the house. “It was an obligatory shake-up, but we’re always fucking watching,” he added as menacingly as possible, but his tone was still softer than it had been moments before.

Evan followed behind Barty and made a motion with his fingers to signal he was keeping an eye on James, but he was still smiling.

Once they had gone inside, Sirius let out a deep sigh and went to stand next to James, leaning up against the side of the house. He took out a pack of cigarettes and offered one to James who declined by shaking his head.

“My talk isn’t going to go anything like that,” He said quietly, staring out at the grassy expanse of land.

James nodded. “What Barty said,” he began quietly feeling trepidation. He had never talked to Sirius about anything like this. He had never brought up family in front of Sirius at all, knowing how Regulus got when they were mentioned. “That wasn’t fair. You were young Sirius. You had every right to leave.”

“Regulus told you about all of this,” Sirius asked, still not looking at James. He didn’t sound angry, just incredibly tired and James felt his heart snag.

“Yeah,” he said quietly. “You leaving when you did, was the best thing you could’ve done. It could’ve been the decision that saved your life. It was hard for Regulus, but the rage he endured, the cut lips, none of that was your fault for leaving. That was your parents' fault. All of that is on them, you know?”

Sirius took a long drag from his cigarette.

“It wasn’t fair for Barty to say that,” James repeated more decidedly.

“I should’ve been there for him,” Sirius’ voice cracked and James had the strange urge to hug him.

“You’re here now.”

“What if that isn’t enough?”

“It’s enough,” James reassured him quietly. “It’s enough.”

Sirius was quiet for a long time and James stood there in the silence, unsure of what to say.

“I think you might be the only one who doesn’t blame me for leaving,” he said after a minute. “And you don’t even know me, not really.”

“Regulus doesn’t blame you either,” James said quickly. “Everything I know about this entire situation came from Regulus and if I could come away from his account, not blaming you, then he doesn’t blame you either. He’s hurt and sometimes he hides it by pretending to be angry but,” James shook his head. “He knows those feelings are misplaced. They’re just, hard to…sort out.”

“Where the fuck did you come from,” Sirius sighed. “You really are bloody perfect then, always know just what to say.”

“I’m only saying the truth,” James shrugged.

Sirius blinked, letting the words settle in him. James had the distinct feeling that he was just as guarded with his feelings as his brother.

“So is he happy,” Sirius asked quietly. “Your speech about listening to him talk about books and art and everything– I think that would make him really happy. He was always too smart for me to keep up with. Sounding ideas and facts off when we were little. I never knew how he kept it all in his brain like that.”

“I think he’s happy,” James nodded. “I hope so.”

“Maybe this is, out of place for me to say this, and I’m sure I have zero credibility when it comes to this but I just don’t want him hurt again.”

“Why does everyone fucking think I’m going to hurt him,” James furrowed his brows. “That’s not going to happen.”

“I’m learning that Regulus is just a lot more fragile than he lets on. Not in a bad way, just in a way where he breaks a little and mends most of the cracks by himself, before you even know about them. You only know he’s hurt when he…shatters,” Sirius sighed.

“Well I’m not going to let him fucking shatter,” James said fiercely and for the first time since the conversation started, Sirius let out a small smile.

“I think you’re a really good person, James. Regulus always did have impeccable taste.”

“...Thank you.”

Sirius put out his cigarette on the bottom of his shoe before standing up, “Alright, Barty and Evan pretty much have everything covered anyway so I guess I’m done.”

“Yeah, well I’m not,” James said quickly. “You and Remus then?”

Sirius nodded slowly, leaning back up against the wall.

“Look, I know we don’t know each other like that but I don’t entirely trust you,” James began honestly. “But Remus trusts you and Regulus is…trying to. And if you fuck with Remus…if

you betray him by working against the heist, and by working against Regulus, then you will have single-handedly managed to hurt the two people I care about the most."

"And you'll what?" Break every bone in my body," Sirius snorted disbelievingly.

"I'll get Barty to do it," James shrugged. "Not to rub salt in the wound but I think that's a proposition he wouldn't mind carrying out."

"Damn," Sirius breathed out.

"Don't fuck with Remus Lupin," James said pointedly.

"Is this the part where you ask me my intentions," Sirius said after a minute.

James watched the birds fly and chirp in the trees.

"No," he shook his head. "I trust Remus. He's an adult, he can make his own decisions, I'm only there to support him. But he really likes you, Sirius. He hasn't been with anyone in a committed sort of capacity, this is a first for him. And he was willing to take your brother's wrath, so he's got a lot on the line for you."

"Yeah, well I fucking love him so," Sirius expressed dramatically. "I'd do anything for him, so you don't have to worry. I know you don't trust me entirely, but I would never do anything to jeopardise him, I want you to know that. I met him and I just knew. I would do anything for him."

James nodded. "Then we're good then."

"It's that easy?"

"You make him happy, that's all I care about really."

Sirius nudged his shoulder playfully. "Jilted lovers club is down all of its members then."

"I think it's time to officially disband," James grinned.

"Happy days."

James hummed in agreement.

For a while they stood side by side in the sunlight, letting the warmth bask on their faces. James liked hanging out with Sirius. Things were uncommonly easy with him. They didn't have to say a lot to understand each other. It was nice.

"Hey idiots, you're needed inside," Barty called out from the front door.

"What? Why," Sirius scoffed.

Barty grinned in excitement. "The heist trial run is happening tonight."

Chapter End Notes

me when i write the most sappy chapter so far

also to weigh in on the debate reg is pronounced like (redge) and reggie is pronounced like (redgie) and then regulus is pronounced like (rEGGulus) im sorry but you simply cannot read this fic any other way 😭 (i mean u can but it's against the laws of nature)

Chapter 25: A Man of Many Talents

Chapter Summary

Practise Heist, Baby!

Chapter Notes

Happy pride month lovelies!! <3

It's still June 1st here for another 30ish minutes so yeah,,, i did meet my self imposed deadline :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I mean are we ready for this? This is so last minute,” Lily whispered. “I’m nervous. I thought there would at least be some sort of warning. Like at least a few days.”

“That’s not what I want to hear from my heist partner! Come on Lily we’re gonna crush it,” Mary shook her head smiling. She gave Lily a nudge of encouragement. “We don’t need any warning we’re fucking amazing.”

Lily gave Mary an uncertain smile back.

“Well I for one, have been born ready for this,” Marlene was saying proudly, setting her shoulders back.

“Yeah, I agree,” Remus gave her a high five, grinning widely. “We’re thieves in the night.”

“International art criminals,” Marlene grinned.

“Super sexy swindlers.”

“Beautiful bandits. Crazy Kleptos.”

“Heist hijackers.”

“Perfect plunderers.”

“Okay, that’s enough,” Barty scoffed, loading some last-minute things into both of the cars.

“Clever crooks,” Evan added with wiggling eyebrows, helping Barty.

“I wanted this to be impromptu,” Regulus interrupted. “You are all prepared for this. You better be prepared for this.” He cast a stern look at every one.

Peter was standing off to the side counting on his fingers.

“This is too much excitement for one day, don’t you think?” Dorcas shook her head, nudging James. “I’m going to need to sleep for three years after this.”

He let out a soft noise of agreement.

“Uh, how are we all going to fit? There’s eleven of us and two cars,” Peter chimed in.

Everyone stood outside looking at the two vehicles as the sun slipped down below the horizon.

“Oh my God, you’re so right,” Dorcas gasped.

“Yes,” Regulus nodded. “I figured four of you could fit into the back seat in one of the cars. It won’t be the most comfortable but it can work,” he shrugged. “It won’t be like this on the heist, but for now, make do."

“Or someone can just sit in someone else's lap,” Lily chimed in helpfully.

“Perfect I’ll sit in Moony’s lap then,” Sirius grinned, wrapping his arms around Remus from behind.

“Moony,” James scoffed. “What kind of-”

“Hell no, I’ll just sit in Dorcas’ lap,” Marlene cut in.

“Oh,” Dorcas grinned, “I like that idea very much.”

“Stop, I said it first,” Sirius frowned.

“Well, I said it second,” Marlene stuck out her tongue at him.

“Both of you shut the fuck up,” Barty snapped. “I don’t have time for this, Evan and I can sit in the back. There. Problem solved you fucking infants,” He rolled his eyes exasperatedly.

“Ha, good one Crouch,” Lily smiled.

Barty grinned back at her with raised eyebrows.

“You’re driving one of the cars Barty, that’s not going to work,” Regulus shook his head.

“Great, well looks like it’s me and Dorcas then,” Marlene sang.

“I don’t give a fuck who sits where except, James is riding with me,” Regulus spoke sharply. “And I want Peter, Mary, and Lily,” Regulus nodded looking around.

“I call shotgun next to Barty,” Evan grinned, already heading to one of the cars. “The rest of you lovesick idiots can figure out the backseat situation amongst yourselves,” He gestured vaguely to Sirius, Remus, Marlene and Dorcas.

“I can’t believe you’re sticking me with all of them,” Barty grumbled.

“Well, I don’t want to deal with them,” Regulus tried to fight a smile. “Listen all of you,” Regulus raised his voice slightly to address the group. “This is just a trial run, so there are no real stakes if you screw up. I’m just trying to get a feel for the mechanics of this operation. I’m looking for holes and areas we need to work on before the actual heist. That being said, you need to go into this acting as if this were the real thing. I don’t want any mistakes.”

“Wait, I’m confused. Are you looking for mistakes or do you want us to be perfect,” Lily asked.

“Both,” Regulus answered definitively.

“Right no pressure,” Dorcas muttered next to James.

“Okay, everyone in the cars. We’ll reconvene once we get there,” Regulus gestured to the cars before heading towards the driver's seat.

James jumped into the passenger seat of the car before anyone else had the chance to. Honestly, he felt the most comfortable sitting there and navigating given Regulus’ aptitude for reckless driving.

One of James’ favourite places was in the passenger seat of the car next to Regulus. So many good moments were spent here, even if his life was in danger half of the time. He had the perfect view of Regulus’ side profile so he could always see when Regulus pulled that half-smile thing he did when he tried not to smile but couldn’t help himself. He could also unashamedly stare at Regulus’ hands wrapped around the steering wheel. His long fingers and his silver rings and the blue veins that traversed his pale skin; James had a thing about Regulus’ hands. He *really* had a thing about Regulus’ hands.

Lily, Mary, and Peter filed into the back. The air was buzzing with a mixture of excitement and nerves. It was practically crackling with electricity. James drummed his fingers on his leg as Regulus slid in calmly to the driver’s seat.

He started the car and rolled down the windows.

“Get in the fucking car you two before I fucking leave you both behind,” Barty was screaming at Sirius and Marlene who were both standing outside the open car door with their arms crossed.

Mary let out a little laugh as Regulus began driving away, leaving them in the driveway.

“Speaking of–Oof,” Peter was interrupted by Regulus taking a sharp turn, slamming everyone to the right. “Speaking of people being left behind is there a particular reason you need James and me here?”

“I want this as close to the real heist as possible. You would be there on the actual night would you not?” Regulus asked pointedly, staring at Peter through the rearview mirror.

“Uh yes, I suppose,” Peter conceded. “But no one is going to get shot tonight, so I won’t even have a chance to practise. I’ll be useless.”

“No one will be shot tonight that you know of,” Regulus deadpanned.

Apparently, James was the only one who could tell he was joking because he was the only one who laughed.

“Anyway, James is here as an extra set of hands. If Remus or Lily needs help, or we need a distraction, something goes wrong, we have James.”

“I thought that’s why we had you,” Lily chimed in from the backseat.

“I have to be in a million places at once. I’m taking in information from all of you, and communicating it back out to all of you. I can send James to where he’s needed so I can continue to watch everyone.”

“So if he needs to help Barty and Evan,” Mary began, “You’re going to strap him with a gun and trust him to shoot?”

James gulped nervously at that idea. Images flashed in his mind of him wielding that heavy gun and pointing it at some scared security guard. A security guard who probably had a family and made barely anything above minimum wage. He was a money guy. He wasn’t a gun-wielding guy like Barty or Evan. *But wasn’t he* ? He blinked to clear his thoughts. Evan told him it was bad to humanise possible targets like that, but James was fairly certain that was because he was a sociopath. When he had told Evan that, Evan had just laughed and informed him that he was only trying to help.

Regulus glanced at James out of the corner of his eye briefly, “Barty and Evan won’t need help,” he said decisively. “And besides, you will all be carrying guns. You know that.”

“For worst-case scenarios,” Peter and Lily echoed at the same time.

They drove in silence for a while. James wasn’t entirely sure what to do. He wanted to lean over and kiss Regulus, because he was there, and James had no self-control, but something was stopping him. Realistically, he should be able to do that, because they just told everyone they were dating, and dating people kissed all the time, yet he still felt the need to refrain. Perhaps it was too soon.

This idea was further confirmed when Mary asked if the air could be turned up and James and Regulus reached for the control at the same time, letting their hands brush against each other for a moment. Lily, who was sitting in the middle, let out a gasp before she and Mary dissolved into tittering and whispers.

“Is Barty supposed to be following us?” Peter asked, looking behind him. “Because I don’t see another car behind us.”

“He knows where he’s going,” Regulus answered.

“Where are we going? What is the plan?”

“You are full of questions tonight Pettigrew,” Regulus answered shortly, tapping on the brakes too hard, which sent everyone lurching forward.

They sat in silence for a while more, but as James thought more and more about it, he found himself asking, “Wait, where are we going?”

“There’s an abandoned school out in the middle of nowhere–”

“-Everything here is the middle of nowhere,” Mary grumbled as Peter scoffed.

“First the warehouse, now the school,” Lily murmured mainly to herself. “Regulus definitely has a thing for abandoned things.”

James let in a sharp breath, but Regulus continued on steadily. “The layout isn’t perfect but it’s three floors just like the Braxton in New York. Barty, Evan, and I did our best to make it as accurate to the real museum as possible.”

“And we’re doing the heist in the dark like this,” Peter asked.

Regulus seemed perfectly content to ignore him, but James prompted him with a small touch on his arm.

“Yes,” he let out a gritted answer. “If everything goes the way I expect it to, then the actual heist will take place roughly a month from now, when the moon looks like this again.”

“Aw, damn, right in the middle of my period,” Lily sighed ruefully.

“Well maybe we can reschedule it for two months out,” James supplied without thinking. “If that would be a better time.”

“No,” Mary and Peter shouted at the same time after an awkward beat of silence. Peter actually leaned forward and swatted at him as Mary dissolved into laughter.

“It’s a cycle James, it happens the same time every month, where the fuck have you–”

“I knew that,” James cried indignantly throwing his hands up as he cut Peter off.

“James has never felt the touch of a woman,” Lily wiped the tears from her eyes as she tried to control her giggles.

“Yes, I have! I knew that! I was just trying to be helpful before I thought it through all the way! Sorry for trying to be nice! Sue me!” James felt his cheeks heat up as his voice came out slightly strained.

“This is why I don’t answer questions,” Regulus muttered, shaking his head as he rolled his eyes.

It was about a thirty-minute drive, and James didn't pay attention to a single road sign or landmark. He couldn't tell you where he was at all. All he had focused on was Regulus, and making sure he stayed on the road, and that he didn't hit any potholes. By the time they had arrived, the only light from the sky came from the smattering of stars and the moon above.

They all got out of the car and stood around in a circle, waiting for Barty and the rest of the group to pull up.

James eyed the school wearily. It was crumbling, and the windows that weren't boarded up had been knocked out, leaving sharp pieces of glass jutting up at odd angles.

"This place looks haunted," Mary breathed, reading James' thoughts. "Creepy and haunted."

Peter shivered, "I'm glad I don't have to go in there."

"So, we've set up minimal lighting in there as well as a security system similar to the one the museum will use. I'll have Marlene flip the switch when she comes in. Now, we don't have any guards actually pacing around in there, but I will be holding you to a very tight timing rotation that should echo their walking patterns. This is more of a test for Remus, Marlene, Mary, and Lily. I want to make sure that you have the timing down, the efficiency, and the general wherewithal. However, Dorcas will be set up out here, monitoring the cameras for practice and getting a good account of what is taking place inside, and Barty and Evan will be pacing the perimeter. I will also be talking to you through the earpieces," Regulus went to the back of the car and opened the trunk. He began passing out radios and earpieces to everyone.

"When did you have all the time to do all of this? How did you know about this place and set everything up?" Lily shook her head in disbelief.

"Barty and Evan helped. It wasn't a big deal," Regulus shrugged as if he had simply made breakfast instead of a life-size museum model for a heist.

"When you two enter," Regulus pointed at Mary and Lily, "Remus and Marlene should've already removed all the paintings from the walls and your job will be to replace the empty frames with the fakes," Regulus rummaged around the car for several rolled up canvases.

Carefully, Lily unrolled one of them and let out a sigh of relief. "Oh good, for a second I thought that these were our replicas and I would've cried to see them rolled up like this."

"No, these are crude, crude imitations of your imitations. They're not very believable but I'm on a time crunch you see," Regulus explained. "Plus, if you ruin these, it doesn't matter, does it?"

Mary and Lily nodded as Barty pulled up, nearly blinding them all with his headlights.

"Well, it would matter a great deal actually, if you ruined these. Because then I couldn't trust you to go into the museum during the real thing; but we'll worry about that only if we have to."

Regulus continued searching through the things in the back of the car as the others from Barty's car filed out, chattering loudly.

He handed Mary and Lily small tool kits that James recognised from the classes when they had to frame and unframe paintings before turning back to the car. "There are fake copies of the paintings inside the school as well, also very poor imitations I'm afraid, but they'll do for the purpose of Marlene and Remus unframing and moving them." Regulus handed a gun to Peter and one to Mary. "We will have two vans the night of the heist, and not these smaller cars but I can't buy them until a few days before the heist. I hope you understand. We need to limit the amount of suspicious activity. So," Regulus handed a gun to Lily and finally one to James. "Imagine bigger cars as well."

"We already explained to the rest of them on the drive over," Barty nodded as the others spread out in a loose circle.

"Remember the guns have the safety lock on, and you're not to take it off for any reason," Regulus eyed everyone.

"Unless you're me and Barty," Evan added with a grin.

"I can't believe you handed me a gun. I can't believe you actually gave me a gun," Sirius whispered in disbelief as he examined it. "Talk about trust."

"Now why would you say that," Remus muttered next to him.

James eyed Sirius nervously.

"Calm down idiot, your gun is loaded with blanks," Barty scoffed.

"Is it really," Sirius frowned.

"Find out," Barty snapped.

Sirius aimed the gun directly at Barty, "Alright. I think I will."

Everyone took several steps back, excluding Regulus and Evan, and James prepared himself for a bloodbath.

Barty didn't even flinch, he just grinned maniacally, daring Sirius to pull the trigger with the glint in his eyes.

"Are you all fucking kidding me," Regulus cut in sharply. "Sirius put the gun down *now* ."

Sirius obliged but they all huddled together and broke out into tense whispers that James couldn't understand.

"And they say women are the dramatic ones," Marlene sauntered over and flung her arm around James. "So," She began with a grin. "Is it like huge," she nodded to Regulus.

“Marlene,” James cried out, horrified. “I love you to death, but what the hell is wrong with you?”

“Well I’m just thinking that it must be for you to do something so stupid, you know? What’s he like, in general? Like is he actually nice to you or?”

“He’s nice to me,” James laughed lightly, feeling himself blush slightly. “He’s so…he’s so,” he attempted to wrack his brain for words that were adequate enough to describe Regulus Black, but everything was coming up short.

“Alright, alright loverboy,” Marlene gave him a light squeeze after a minute. “I get you can’t tell me all the details in mixed company like this,” Marlene cast a glance towards Sirius and Barty who were no longer arguing but looking very subdued by whatever admonishments Regulus was whispering to them. “But I want a full rundown when we’re alone. Spare nothing.” She made a crude gesture for emphasis.

James gave her a slight smile and rolled his eyes. “I just want it noted that it was me who suggested you wear those brown trousers way back when you went on that ‘work outing’ with him and you were freaking out. He probably fell in love with you because of how good you looked that day, so really you owe me for this whole relationship,” Marlene nodded smugly.

“Okay Marlene, I’m sure that’s right,” James grinned, finally propping an arm around her shoulders too.

“Look, just between me and you, you’re my favourite person here. I mean, excluding Dorcas of course. She really is on another level entirely. But, yeah, if Regulus is ever…not nice to you… Remus and I will mobilise and…poison him or something.”

“Poison?”

“Well, I’m afraid to confront him directly because he is so fucking scary–”

“He’s really not that–”

“-But I will indirectly support you. I think rat poison works on humans too.”

Marlene was a ridiculous person in the best way possible and James loved her to pieces. It was nice that she was willing to stand up for him even if it was a little misguided.

“You’re like my Barty,” James chuckled.

“What?” Marlene scoffed indignantly. “No, the fuck I’m not. I’m your Marlene McKinnon,” she broke away and punched him lightly on the arm. “Don’t forget it.”

“McKinnon, come on,” Remus called, shuffling his feet excitedly. “We’re about to go in.”

“That’s my cue,” she grinned excitedly. “See you on the other side when I have a billion dollars worth of fake fine art in my hands. Try to make yourself useful or something. I’m half convinced Regulus just brought you so you could sit there and look pretty.”

“You better wow me in there McKinnon,” James called after her. “Remember your girlfriend is watching!”

“In that case, I’ll be sure to put on a show,” She winked before jumping into Dorcas’ arms to give her a kiss.

“Peter, James,” Regulus called. “You’re with me and Dorcas. The rest of you– you know where to go. So go. I’ll instruct Marlene and Remus to enter when everyone is in position. No one fuck this up.”

The slightly unrestrained atmosphere quickly turned solemn as everyone moved with an almost robotic-like precision to their designated places. The only sound was coming from the whistling wind and the humming of insects in the dark night. They all tread carefully so that not even their footsteps made a single noise. Now that the sun had gone down, it was much cooler and James gave a small shiver as he walked over to Peter and Regulus.

Dorcas was sitting in one of the cars with all of the doors open. She was in the passenger seat and had three laptops propped open on the dashboard and one in her lap. Regulus was in the driver's seat adjusting his headpiece and James and Peter quickly slid into the back seat of the car. It was still on, idling in neutral and ready to take off in a millisecond for a quick getaway.

James fiddled with his earpiece just in time to hear Remus’ voice come through.

“Ready.”

“Yeah we’re good too boss,” Evan’s voice rang out gruffly.

James looked at all of the screens Dorcas had pulled up. He could see the heavily shadowed figures of Barty and Evan ambling around the building at a steady pace. They both had their guns drawn which James didn’t appreciate in the slightest, but neither of them seemed terribly concerned.

“Okay,” Regulus’ voice came out strong and steady. It calmed James instantly, even though he wasn’t doing anything but sitting in the backseat. Regulus glanced down at his watch on his wrist watching the second hand aptly. “McKinnon, Lupin, Black… you’re on.”

James watched, holding his breath, as Remus, Marlene, and Sirius entered the school quickly. Sirius was headed through the hallways on the first floor as Marlene and Remus headed up the stairs to the fake ground level. All of them were doing their best to stay out of the lens of the cameras, always obscuring their faces from direct view. If James hadn’t spent every day for the last several months with all of them, he wouldn't be able to identify them in a lineup with one hundred per cent certainty based on the camera footage. It was good plausible deniability.

In the real heist, the real camera footage would be routed directly to Dorcas while the security screens in the museum played footage of the empty galleries on a loop. How Dorcas was able to do this was beyond James’ comprehension, but he was perpetually in awe of her.

“Remus, Marlene, after you wind the stairs the first gallery will be the second room on your right. You’ll then work through the remaining classrooms like gallery spaces clockwise. If I have to prompt you I will, but don’t make me prompt you to move on.” Regulus was watching the screen with acute attention as Dorcas was flicking through various screens on the computer in her lap. James looked at two red dots that were moving slowly on a floor layout in the corner of one of the laptop screens.

“Potential guard paths,” Dorcas explained looking at James’ reflection in the mirror. “It’s a simulated model based off of months of monitoring real paths the guards walk every night.”

James looked at Mary and Lily on the screen. They were standing as still as possible by the entrance waiting with canvases in their arms. Uncharacteristically, neither of them were speaking. If everything went to plan, they would enter eight to ten minutes after Remus and Marlene.

It was as if James was watching a riveting movie on the screens of Dorcas’ computers starring all of his friends. It felt entirely too real and completely fictional all at the same time and James’ brain couldn’t quite make sense of it.

“Nice handiwork,” Sirius’ voice came through over the headpiece, snapping James’ attention to the box on Dorcas’ screen containing Sirius. “Piss poor imitations.”

He was walking around the abandoned cafeteria which was serving as a makeshift storage basement, eyeing the paintings all stacked up side by side, hardly allowing any section of the wall to be visible. Regulus ignored him.

Remus and Marlene were on the floor grappling with a large impressionist work. They had just managed to free it from the frame and were counting the nails and lining them up for Mary and Lily. Marlene grabbed the canvas delicately by the sides and propped it up against the exit while Remus moved on to a smaller painting in the same room, taking it down off the wall carefully.

James couldn’t help but celebrate their small successes as they happened. He felt his heartbeat quicken as he watched Remus and Marlene work diligently and quickly. They were mesmerizing in the semi-darkness working hand in hand as a cohesive unit. God, it was exhilarating just to watch. James found himself wondering what it would be like to be a part of it. To be there with Remus, his hands working on prying the canvas from the frame with delicate care, his fingers sorting through the nails that were used hundreds of years ago. He was just the money guy, but at that moment he found himself wanting to be more. He didn’t want to be the gun-wielding guy either though. Surely there had to be a middle ground. A nice inbetween.

They stayed this way for a few minutes. Peter and James watched aptly as Dorcas flipped through confusing screens and video monitors silently. Regulus would watch the screen too, occasionally alternating between taking down notes and checking his watch religiously.

“Mary, Lily, enter now,” Regulus said into the earpiece.

Both girls sprung into action, entering into the abandoned building that was now teeming with newly minted art criminals. For a minute James began to panic, because Marlene and Remus were still in the first gallery. He was certain that Mary and Lily would run into them, which Regulus made very clear, shouldn't happen under any circumstances. Four people in one gallery was too much of a liability during the heist. Cramped spaces led to stepping on one another's toes, brushing up against paintings, losing nails, being unable to avoid cameras, or accidentally tripping security wires. But Regulus had timed it perfectly, no sooner had Remus and Marlene entered the second classroom, Lily and Mary bounded up the stairs and into the first classroom with bundles and bundles of rolled-up canvases underneath their arms.

In class one day, Regulus had explained that the fake canvases didn't need to be treated as delicately as the real ones, much to Mary and Lily's outrage who considered every canvas they painted their personal child. The canvases were colour-coded with markings on the back of them so Mary and Lily could grab them in order of gallery rooms without having to unravel each one to check the subject matter of the individual paintings. Mary claimed that she had practised sorting the canvases so many times by now, she could tell them apart by size and weight.

Mary and Lily emptied their arms and each grabbed one canvas before moving to work on opposite sides of the classroom. They unravelled the canvas and began restretching them on the frames that Remus and Marlene had laid out. James could see them using the tiny black handheld toolkits to redrive the nails into the frame.

James remembered how many times they all had to practise nailing the canvases. They needed to be quick, and quiet enough that no one heard them hammering away but they also had to hit the nail hard enough to go in with one or two strikes. Regulus had gone on and on about acute and perpendicular angles and degrees to hold the nail in relation to the hammer that made James' head hurt, but he was impressed with Mary and Lily who just seemed to understand perfectly.

"Actually, Regulus, I could use another hand down here," Sirius' voice came through in James' ear.

Outside the entrance of the building, Evan froze, ready to be told to go in.

"Send James in here to help me."

Peter sat up in surprise next to James, going rigid. "Can they draft us like that? I didn't think we could be drafted like that," he exclaimed with wide eyes.

"Drafted? This isn't war," Dorcas scoffed.

"Sirius, are you fucking with me right now because I swear to fucking God–" Regulus clenched his hand into a fist tightly and James could see his fingers digging into his palm.

"No, think about it. These works are in storage so we can take them with the frame and everything, but I'm literally one guy. If James comes down here, he can start running the paintings I've pulled out to the car. We double the number of works we can take and cut the

number of trips needed in half," he said quickly as he removed a large painting from the wall to add to the small stack of ones he'd already collected. "It's literally the easiest job. What could go wrong?"

James was petrified, but there was a small part that wanted to prove himself. He was just the money guy, but he could do anything that was needed of him. He could go in there and help Sirius. He could be more than the money guy, he could have a hand in the tangible aspects of the heist. Besides, wasn't that what Regulus said he was there for anyway? James held his breath waiting for Regulus to respond.

"What? Are you too afraid to send your boyfriend in here? My boyfriend is in here," Sirius taunted, still not stopping his job. In fact, no one was stopping what they were doing. They were all moving diligently with this conversation happening over the headpiece. "I'm in here."

"You're doing this to prove a point and now really isn't the fucking time," Regulus said in a voice so terrifying both Peter and Dorcas physically recoiled.

"Regulus, let me go in. I can go in," James blurted quickly.

"James," Regulus said sharply.

"No, I can go in and help. He's right, I'm trained, I know what I'm doing, all my friends are in there, let me in there. I can do it," James pressed, already feeling the adrenaline taking over his senses.

"There's no fucking point, he's doing it to be an arsehole," Regulus seethed quickly.

"It's just a practice run anyway, let me do it."

Sirius said something in French that James couldn't understand. "I can carry five paintings out at one time at best," Sirius continued on in English. "If they're small and even then there will be some damage. One or two large ones."

"Look, would you send Peter in?" James continued rapidly. He knew they didn't have time to be arguing about this.

"Of course not," Regulus strained. "He's the only one here with a fucking medical license, do you think I'm an idiot?"

"If he wasn't though? Like if I wasn't me. If I was anyone else here, would you send me in there," James countered quickly.

Regulus' hesitation was the only answer he needed.

"Send me in," James said more firmly. The last thing he needed was some weird special treatment from Regulus. Relationships on the team would only complicate things if you let them.

“Fucking hell,” Regulus muttered under his breath. “I’m sending James in now,” he said into the headpiece and James scrambled out of the car, his gun carefully tucked into the waistband of his trousers like Barty had shown him.

“James,” Regulus called as James prepared to head into the building. “Sirius’ gun is real. There aren’t blanks in there…they’re real bullets.” James nodded sharply not getting the full meaning Regulus was trying to convey to him with that statement, but he acted confident anyway– even if the words had planted an uneasy feeling in James’ stomach. “Go stand by the door and wait for my cue to enter,” Regulus said shortly before turning back to Dorcas’ screen.

James moved quickly in the night from the cars to the back entrance of the building. He knew the route to the cafeteria already. He had just seen Sirius wander through the halls. He began rapidly going over everything he knew in his head.

Walk silently. Move quickly. Hide your face from the cameras. Move at different intervals and paces. Always have an escape route. Shadows are your friends. Be mindful of trip alarms. Suffocate yourself before you cough out loud. It’s harder to be shot or tased if you run in a zigzag pattern. Only touch the frames of paintings.

James did his best to slow his breathing, the adrenaline rush was causing him to take shallow and quick breaths.

“James, go in. There’s a guard to your right so take the alternate path to the left. It mirrors the same floor plan as the museum.”

Fuck , James cursed to himself. Sirius had taken the path to the right. That was the one he was most confident in. But he had studied the floor plans like everyone else. He could do this. Besides, Regulus had set the trial run up so that only the floorplan of the Braxton was lit up inside the school. Any parts of the building that didn’t fit the floor plan were cast in darkness. James figured he could use the light to guide him if needed.

He wasn’t sure if there really was a fake guard coming in from the right or if Regulus was doing this to purposely make his life more difficult and to prove a point. If James failed at this, then there would be no way even Sirius could justify keeping him in on the heist. He was determined to do this perfectly.

It was surprisingly easy. Once he was inside the building, he felt more confident than he had before. There was something strangely nice about having Remus, Marlene, Mary, and Lily working one floor above him. James could picture them, all parts in a giant cohesive machine. All performing for greatness.

He rounded the hallway as the fluorescent lights flickered dismally, making sure his footsteps made no noise on the linoleum floors. It still felt eerie inside. Perhaps this place was haunted. *Or* , James thought amusedly, *maybe I’m the ghost. Wandering through the halls and making no noise. Being the reason things mysteriously go missing.* He smiled at that.

“A guard has entered gallery one,” Regulus’ voice rang calmly in James’ ear. “Everything looks good.”

James frowned to himself. Regulus sounded way more ominous now that he couldn't see what was happening to everyone on Dorcas' computers.

"Perfect you're here," Sirius whispered as James burst into the cafeteria. He was standing on his tiptoes grasping at a painting. "There are two cameras in storage–"

"Yes, I know," James replied shortly.

"Okay…well then, just take those paintings," Sirius nodded to a sizable pile of works all stacked up against a wall. "As many as you can reasonably carry, carefully. Start with the largest ones first. Oh, and ask Regulus what route to take back out to the car." He grunted with effort as he pried another painting off the wall. "And don't fucking touch anything you're not taking with you. They'll get you fast on your fingerprints," Sirius grinned.

It was a slightly odd dynamic for a moment. James would even dare to say that Sirius seemed to be enjoying himself. It made him feel slightly more at ease.

Without taking too long to think about it, James grabbed two large paintings and hiked them under each of his arms, making sure to only touch the frames.

"Take the same route back out that you came in, James," Regulus called and James nodded. More carefully and slowly than before, James wound his way through the hallways, encumbered by the heavy and large paintings. Once he made it outside, he stacked the paintings carefully on the top of the car as Regulus had instructed them to do.

According to Regulus, when they had the vans, they would be able to secure the paintings in the back, but for now, this would have to suffice.

James grinned madly at Dorcas and Regulus as he prepared to go back in. Peter gave him a smile and a thumbs up, but Regulus was wearing that indecipherable expression that James hated so much. It was a look that was impenetrable; the one that Regulus used to seal himself away from the world to pretend that everything was fine. But James knew something was happening beneath the surface; turmoil. The depth and tenacity of that turmoil was completely unknown to him, but James knew then that he'd have to prepare for the flood eventually.

"Take the path to the right this time."

James nodded at Regulus' instruction and went back in. He was met with a wide grin from Sirius as he re-entered the cafeteria.

"Ah didn't fuck it up then," Sirius had picked up three paintings. "Good on you. I'll wait for you if you want to follow me out."

James scrambled quickly to pick up more paintings so as not to delay them by even a few seconds.

"It's so much better to do this with a partner," Sirius whispered lowly. "I never was one for working alone. I fucking love camaraderie."

James and Sirius followed Regulus' instructions and soon they fell into an incredibly easy routine as they went back and forth from the cafeteria to the car, moving the paintings with care and precision. He thought about his friends upstairs and his friends outside and felt incredibly, albeit strangely, lucky. This was by far the craziest and coolest and most insane thing he would ever do in his life, crazier than anything most people would ever do in their lives, and he got to do it with people he considered friends.

James was holding the last painting in place to the roof of the car as Sirius began tying it securely when Regulus issued his final instructions.

"Mary and Lily, Remus and Marlene left paintings at the end of galleries four, five, and seven for you to pick up. Marlene and Remus, you two handle the rest. I want all four of you out in three minutes."

He began giving them instructions to get out of the building.

Sirius grinned widely at James. "We were supposed to be the last ones out and look at us! We beat those fuckers! We're first out of there and we grabbed eight more paintings than we would've been able to if I was working alone!"

He high-fived James as he laughed. "We make a good team Sirius," James smiled, barely illuminated by the moonlight.

"That we do, that we do," Sirius sighed in delight. "If you work like this on heist night," he let out a whistle, "we'll be set for life."

"So you're really going to go through with the heist," James eyed him a bit more carefully than before. "Committed and everything?"

"Yeah, I am. It helps me if I look at it as a giant elaborate prank," Sirius explained quietly. "I always loved a good prank."

"Oh me too," James agreed, nodding. "I was a real terror in school. The stories I could tell you."

"I'd like to hear them some time," Sirius laughed. "I mean if we're heist partners now, we might as well get to know each other."

"Is that what we are?"

"Well you were damn near perfect tonight, so yeah, I'd say so. Regulus would be a fucking fool not to put you in," Sirius clapped James on the shoulder good-naturedly.

James smiled.

Marlene was the first one out, followed by Remus, and they began strapping paintings to the other car as Mary and Lily followed closely behind them, jumping into the backseat.

"I'd say it's too hot for your jacket," James nodded to the black leather Sirius was wearing. "But it makes you look really fucking cool, so I get it."

Sirius let out a laugh. “Damn it, Potter, you might just make me want to be friends with you.”

“Well, there are worse things for heist partners to be,” James supplied.

Something had passed between James and Sirius. James had managed to go in and help Sirius without flaws or mistakes. In turn, Sirius hadn’t sabotaged James or the heist. Perhaps this mutual understanding had transitioned slightly over into trust.

“Both of you, in the fucking car. Now,” Regulus called to them as Barty and Evan came running towards the vehicle.

James was now in the car with Regulus, Dorcas, Peter, and Sirius. He half expected everyone to race off at lightning speed once Barty had jumped into the driver’s seat of the other car, but instead, both Regulus and Barty sat completely still for a moment.

Dorcas began the process of closing out of all her softwares and shutting down her computers. Regulus was writing rapidly on a notepad.

“Everyone out of the car,” he muttered, shutting off the engine.

James took a look at the other car and could see that everyone there was doing the same.

“You were so good out there babe,” Dorcas ran to Marlene and spun her around. “What a fucking rockstar.”

“Remus,” James called with a wide smile.

“James, you’re fucking crazy! I can’t believe they put you in! How’d it go?” Remus laughed.

They were all coming down from the effects of their adrenaline.

“Well we managed all of that,” James nodded to the roof of the car where he and Sirius had tied up all their paintings. “Sirius said we’d grabbed eight more than originally planned. So I’d consider it a great success.”

“Look at you,” Remus shook his head. “James Potter, a man of many talents.”

“I knew you were more than just a pretty face,” Marlene beamed from Dorcas’ arms.

Regulus was carefully inspecting all of the paintings and writing things down meticulously.

“No, and then I thought they had left a nail, but it was just in the shadows and I couldn’t see it,” Lily was explaining breathlessly to Peter. “I thought we were doomed for sure, but then I saw it glint just slightly in the light.”

“God it was so hard to remember that this was just a test,” Mary shook her head. “It felt so real. I thought it was real.”

Everyone nodded in agreement.

“Well I didn’t hear of any mistakes,” Peter was smiling. “So I think it’s safe to say, we did it.”

They all chattered and laughed and recounted moments where they felt as if they had been in terrible peril but managed to work through it before Regulus interrupted them.

One by one, they all fell silent watching him with apprehension. He still wore that unreadable expression, which was cause for concern.

“Tonight, we completed a heist. A heist that took place in 48 minutes and 12 seconds and earned us a total of 973.4 million dollars. Divided by the eleven of us, that’s 88.5 million dollars apiece.” At this Regulus broke into a smile which was all Marlene needed to start cheering loudly.

The group broke out into excited laughter and disbelief. Some people clapped and some hollered in delight. Barty and Evan were doing an almost synchronised dance.

Regulus held up his hands to silence everyone, but he was still smiling. “There are some things we will definitely need to work on and discuss during the next class, but I consider tonight a success. Prior to this run, the greatest art heist took 81 minutes and only 500 million dollars. Do not let this make you complacent, and do not let this get to your head,” Regulus attempted to keep the excitement out of his voice, but James could tell he was enthralled. “We will be working just as hard, if not more so over the next few weeks, but this time next month, we will be doing this at the Braxton in New York.”

The crowd broke out into more delighted cheers.

James had never felt more overjoyed. All of this hard work over the span of months, getting closer to a year, was finally coming to a head. It was a rush of adrenaline and excitement like he had never experienced before. Even though it was a trial run, he felt as if he was flirting dangerously with the edge of a cliff, loving the recklessness of it all. Everything was working out perfectly.

Regulus must have echoed James’ same sentiments because he crossed the circle of people, all caught up in their own excitement and threw himself into James’ arms, kissing him fervidly.

Once James got over his momentary panic about being seen in public, he kissed him back. It was a culmination of adrenaline and excitement. Power and nervousness. Love and fear. Success and victory, and it tasted sweeter than fucking honey.

“Whoooo! Hell yeah James get it,” Marlene screamed and James laughed, breaking the kiss.

“Get a room,” Barty threw something at them, but James had no idea what it was.

“My eyes, Moony,” Sirius was wailing. “My beautiful virgin eyes!”

“The great thing about being the boss,” Regulus began before kissing James again, “is that I can do whatever the fuck I want.” Regulus’ eyes were blown wide and James had the urge to

drag him by the wrist into the abandoned school, haunted or not, he'd take his chances, but Regulus turned back around before he had the chance.

"They are cute together I suppose," Mary eyed James and Regulus back and forth unimpressed as she talked to Lily who nodded in agreement. "Just purely based on visual aesthetics."

"Okay everyone," Regulus cleared his throat. "Guns go with Barty and Evan, earpieces go with me, we'll load up and head out. I'm…this was a good run," he said quickly.

"Aw," Barty grinned. "Are you proud of us Regulus? It's okay, you can say it. You're proud of us."

Regulus flipped him off.

"He's beaming with pride," Evan called out dramatically.

"Please," Regulus sighed. "Let's move. I'd like to get to bed sooner rather than later."

"Like to get James to bed sooner rather than later," Marlene half muttered with a cheeky grin.

James shot her a wide-eyed look but was smiling despite himself.

"Barty, leave McKinnon here, she can walk home," Regulus said flatly, holding out his hands as people began placing their earpieces in them.

"Will do," Barty gave a little salute.

"We did it," James whispered into Regulus' ear, wrapping an arm around his waist. He planted a small kiss on Regulus' cheek and felt the butterflies form in his stomach as Regulus leaned into him.

"We haven't done anything yet, James. Not really," Regulus responded, warningly. But even as he said it, James could see the corner of Regulus' mouth turn up slightly as he tried to fight a growing smile.

Chapter End Notes

I wrote most of this chapter whilst on some crazy cough syrup bc i recently tested positive for covid so sorry if this chapter is weird LMAO i hope it's not tho <333 (that sounds so much worse than it actually is, the medicine makes me drowsy so i was fighting medicinally induced sleep and trying to serve content) <333

<3 Marlene McKinnon my love <3

James: should i kiss reg? should i not? everyone just found out abt us mere hours ago,, perhaps i should not do anything
Regulus: fuck it! we just made almost a hundred million fake dollars tonight! i will be making out with my hot boyfriend! i don't care who sees!

Chapter 26: Everyone loves ABBA

Chapter Summary

this is so corny bye

Chapter Notes

shorter chapter this time everyone :))
love and adore you as always <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"You were fucking amazing," Regulus pressed his lips on James' as soon as his bedroom closed behind them. He was rough and crazed and his hands were pulling at James' hair and the collar of his shirt as he used his weight to keep James pressed up against the wall, but James had no intention of going anywhere anyway. "You were fucking perfect, James."

Regulus' room was warm and the familiar smell of cinnamon and tea and Regulus flooded his senses and James let out a soft moan, letting his eyes flutter closed. Regulus had kissed him. Regulus had kissed him in front of everyone tonight, he did it and he meant it and it was driving James absolutely insane. The force and wonder that was Regulus was taking over everything. All of James' reasoning and sense meant nothing in Regulus' wake as his words of praise rang in his ears.

"Reg," James broke away from the heated kiss with a small laugh. "I actually like this shirt so if we could–" but James stopped suddenly because he realised that Regulus was simultaneously pushing and pulling him.

He had taken James by the collar of his shirt, a fistfull of fabric in each hand, and pulled him roughly back to his lips before he pushed James back against the wall harshly.

"You're so fucking stupid. Why would you do that to me tonight, huh?" Regulus whispered hoarsely.

James tried to speak, but Regulus kissed him again before any noise made it out of his mouth. Something was definitely wrong, James could tell that something had shifted as Regulus' shaking hands started unbuttoning the top buttons of James' shirt.

"Re–," James tried again but Regulus shoved his tongue back in James' mouth and oh, James was surprisingly weak and easy and incredibly confused and turned on all at the same time.

James tried to move closer to Regulus so he could wrap his arms around him, so he could gain some sort of control, but he began pushing James' shoulders back against the wall roughly to stop him every time. "Why the fuck would you do this to me? Why?"

One look into Regulus' eyes let James know that this was it, this was the turmoil, this was the flood that was hiding behind Regulus' unreadable expression earlier tonight. James tried to take a step closer to Regulus, but Regulus kept pushing him back and for a moment James let himself be thrown around under Regulus' hands as he leaned into his kiss.

"Regulus, love, what's wrong," James finally managed in a moment of breathless respite.

He let out a loud groan as he began frantically swatting James in the chest, his open faced palms hitting him lightly and not enough to hurt, just enough to drum against him. "Don't call me that," Regulus planted sloppy kisses along James' jawline. Instinctively, James' eyes fluttered closed again and he tilted his head back. "When I'm so fucking angry at you," Regulus finished, kissing him again.

But that last sentence was enough to break whatever spell Regulus had him under.

"Reg–Reg," James managed, turning his face to the side. Quickly, he grabbed Regulus' wrists in his hands as gently as he could, but firm enough that Regulus couldn't wiggle out of his grasp to continue his frenzied behaviour. "Regulus, stop. Stop."

Regulus was breathing heavily and his lips were slightly swollen and pink. In a brief moment of clarity, James could see Regulus' fear so transparently behind his green eyes.

"Oh, Regulus," James breathed out softly.

Regulus reeled back in an attempt to break out of his grasp, but James still had him held firmly by the wrists. Once he realised his struggle was futile, he stopped thrashing and sank into himself.

"You were perfect," Regulus sighed more sadly this time, shrugging his shoulders. "You didn't even try to mess things up."

James furrowed his brows in confusion. "Why would I mess this up? Regulus, this heist is the most important thing to you, I would never do that."

"No," Regulus shook his head vehemently and James let go of his wrists once he was sure Regulus wouldn't bolt. "I mean, it is important to me, yes, but," he closed his eyes tightly. James held his breath waiting for Regulus to finish his thought. "It's dangerous. It's dangerous, that's all."

James eyed him carefully in a desperate attempt to read between the lines, to hear the words Regulus wasn't saying out loud.

"I just want you close to me," Regulus said quietly after a moment. "All the time."

"Regulus, nothing is going to happen to me. You know that right? Everything is going to be fine."

James' words however, did not seem to have the intended effect he wanted, because Regulus' eyes grew wider with panic. Delicately, he cupped Regulus' face with his hands and began stroking his cheeks softly with the pads of his thumbs.

"Hey," James cooed. "You just got through saying you wouldn't let anything affect the heist, even me. You're worried about losing credibility? You'd lose credibility if you didn't send me in there, it was fine, Reg. Everything worked out just fine." Regulus seemed to calm down slightly under James' touch. "Sirius tried to call your bluff and you didn't let him," James finished with a small smile. "And we actually did pretty well together."

At that, Regulus met James' gaze with a fiery glare.

"Sirius," he spat angrily, tearing himself away from James' grasp. He turned sharply as he headed towards the door.

"Wait, Regulus, where are you going? We should talk about this," James called, following after him as he stormed through the dark house and up the stairs loudly.

Without knocking, he barged into Remus' room as James trailed behind him, unsure what to do in the wake of Regulus' renewed rage. He was experiencing serious whiplash from the wide range of changing emotions tonight.

It was very evident that even though the light was still on, and both Remus and Sirius were mostly clothed, that Regulus had interrupted something.

"Do you knock? Ever," Sirius responded exasperatedly from Remus' bed. "Privacy is something that is so important to me. A fundamental human right even."

"This isn't even your room," Regulus returned flatly, fully stepping into the room. James, still uncertain of what to do, followed him in and leaned against the wall at the edge of the room with an embarrassed smile.

Remus got over his momentary surprise and scrambled up, buttoning and zipping up his trousers quickly. Frantically, he looked around the room for his shirt before he found it on the floor and threw it over his head. He took one look at James with his crooked glasses, dishevelled hair, blooming red marks on his jaw, and half unbuttoned shirt before he gave him a sheepish grin. "You too then?"

"This night isn't really going in the direction I thought it would," James admitted, letting out a puff of air.

With as much dignity as possible, Remus turned back to Regulus, "Did you need me for something," he asked, clearing his throat.

"No, go stand next to James," Regulus nodded to where James was standing, and Remus obeyed. He gave James a confused look as he took his place next to him and James responded by giving him a confused shrug and a slight frown. He knew Regulus was here to talk to Sirius, but he didn't feel like leaving him alone in his emotionally volatile state.

“Don’t talk to him like that,” Sirius scoffed, still laying in the bed.

“You,” Regulus said fiercely, ignoring Sirius’ previous comment. “Get up. I can’t take you seriously when you’re laying down like that.”

Sirius gave an exaggerated and pained sigh and stood up, also buttoning his trousers before running a hand through his hair. Sirius, thankfully, still had his shirt on.

“What the fuck was that tonight,” Regulus spat, glaring angrily at Sirius.

“What, asking James for help? Did that surprise you? Did that catch you off guard,” Sirius goaded, his eyes narrowing in anger.

“You didn’t stick to the fucking plan.”

“Yeah, too fucking right I didn’t. And you’re welcome because I made the heist exponentially more successful,” Sirius scoffed, his anger level quickly matching Regulus’.

“Cut the bullshit Sirius,” Regulus countered in his icy tone. “You never fucking cared about any of that.”

“Uh oh,” James muttered next to Remus, getting slightly worried at the rising tension in the room.

Remus was watching the exchange carefully with his mouth drawn in a tight line.

“Maybe,” Sirius continued. “Maybe you just don’t like me using someone you care about as collateral damage. Doesn’t feel too fucking spectacular does it?”

“You fucking–” Regulus’ hands were shaking.

“I thought we were trying to move past all of this Sirius,” Remus cut in, frowning.

Sirius didn’t even look at him, he was focused solely on Regulus. “Yeah and I thought there would be real fucking bullets in my gun but no one is trusting anyone around here are they?”

“You fucking idiot,” Regulus cried lunging forward and pushing Sirius with both hands. “Your gun did have real bullets. It had real fucking bullets! You got James involved in this over a gun? A fucking gun,” Regulus was raging now.

“Bullshit,” Sirius was yelling now. “You’re lying. I thought we were moving on but you don’t trust me enough to treat me like everyone else in the group. Fine! Maybe we aren’t really any better off than when we started.”

“No, he’s telling the truth,” James added quickly. “He told me your gun was real.” James wasn’t entirely sure what he expected with that statement, all he knew was that he wanted to make the situation better, and quickly.

Neither of them acknowledged James as Sirius kept his intense stare locked on Regulus.

“You sent Remus in there,” Sirius continued, pushing Regulus back slightly. “The man that I love, that I care about. You didn’t care, you didn’t hesitate. You sent me in there. I’m your brother. So why do you care so much that James went in,” Sirius taunted, still pushing Regulus back. “Don’t fucking tell me it took him to make you realise how dangerous all of this actually was. What? Was me getting shot not enough for you?” Sirius pushed Regulus back harder so that he stumbled back a few steps. “Was I not enough for you?” He spat the last sentence out in a mocking tone and Regulus flinched slightly.

That was enough for James, and he started forward, but Remus held out a hand to stop him.

“Fuck you,” Regulus lunged forward and pushed him back with equal force.

“Fuck you,” Sirius returned.

“Should we let them push each other like that,” James whispered to Remus, his jaw clenched. “I really don’t like that. We should stop this.”

Remus shrugged watching them both carefully. He seemed more calm than James did, but he was standing slightly more tense than before. “I don’t know. Maybe it’s a sibling thing. Don’t siblings do this all the time? They’re not throwing punches or anything.”

“I don’t know,” James let out a sigh of distress. “I was an only child! But it looks very close to being out of hand.”

Remus nodded rapidly.

“Okay, I don’t think this is productive anymore,” Remus said loudly to both of them. “Maybe we should table this conversation for the morning.”

“And without the pushing,” James added.

“James is in on the heist,” Regulus cut in fiercely. “And he’ll help you. I know you only did this to hurt me, but if you let anything,” Regulus’ voice trembled, “happen to him–”

“I won’t, Regulus. Unlike you, I actually care that everyone makes it out of this safely,” Sirius retorted.

“That’s not fair,” Regulus responded weakly. “I thought we were getting somewhere,” he let out a tired sigh. “One step forward and two steps back.”

They stared at each other for a long time. James could clearly tell that they were having some sort of silent conversation that he couldn’t possibly understand.

Without another word, Regulus turned back around and walked towards the door. James followed his lead quickly, flinging his arm around him and pulling him close.

“Night Remus,” James called as Remus gave him a small smile.

“Good night heist partner,” Sirius called after James and Regulus cast an icy glare at him over his shoulder.

“What, do you prefer brother lover instead,” Sirius cackled. James was getting whiplash from his mood swings tonight as well. The Black brother’s were certainly a force to be reckoned with.

“I actually really hate that, mate. For what it’s worth,” James shook his head.

“It’s fine, we’ll brainstorm ideas later wh–” Sirius was cut off as Regulus slammed the door behind them.

“I think it will be good if you talk to him tomorrow,” James said softly, still walking with Regulus as they treaded down the stairs. “And we should probably talk tomorrow too. I think that Sirius is-”

“James,” Regulus sighed tiredly, interrupted. “Just take me to bed, please.”

“Yeah okay,” James nodded quickly.

—---

“This has been the longest night of my entire life,” Sirius mumbled into the crook of Remus’ neck.

“It is kind of crazy that Regulus just knew you would be in here,” Remus snorted.

Sirius laughed sleepily, “apparently, we’re really fucking obvious.”

“We do need to talk about what happened though,” Remus added, staring up at the ceiling, even though it was pitch black in his room.

“What is it with you and James and talking about feelings all the time? Sometimes it’s good to just let things…”

“Fester? Boil over? Rot?” Remus supplied pointedly in the silence. “I talk about things way less than James and even I’m telling you this is a conversation we need to have so let’s have it.”

“Okay Remus, okay. But I’m only agreeing because I love you.”

“Hmm, so you’ve said.”

Sirius reminded Remus nearly every other sentence that he loved him. It was just a natural instinct at this point and Remus wasn’t even sure Sirius was aware that he was saying it half of the time, not that he was complaining. It made him blush ridiculously every time.

“Well…where do we start,” Sirius said after a moment.

“Well I suppose we start with the fact that James is my friend too Sirius. He’s my best friend and I don’t fucking appreciate you using him the way you did tonight, to get back at Regulus.”

“I know,” Sirius sighed quietly. “I’m sorry about that. I actually really like James. He’s a good guy.”

“Yeah, he is,” Remus said pointedly. “What you’re trying to do, makes you no better than Regulus, you know? Using other people to hurt your brother isn’t the way to do things.”

Remus felt Sirius flinch slightly at that and felt slightly bad for using such harsh words, but he needed Sirius to understand the gravity and implications of his spur of the moment decision.

“I know, I’m sorry… please don’t be mad at me Moony, I just did it to fuck with Regulus, but James doesn’t have to help on the actual night of the heist. I’ll tell Regulus tomorrow and get it all sorted. I’m sorry.”

Sirius sounded so forlorn and Remus reached out in the dark to stroke the side of his face lovingly, over his momentary anger. Truthfully, Sirius had adjusted to their circumstances rather quickly, and well, given everything. There were times when he would yell and rant and Remus would listen dutifully and Sirius prattled on about being a no-good con man and a criminal. But there were other times when Sirius would almost forget himself, and murmur excitedly in Remus’ ear at night about the heist and what they learned in class that day. Remus was always careful with Sirius in his more precarious moments, it was the least he could do. They worked through them together.

“James is a grown man. He can make his own decision about whether or not he wants to participate, but that would be nice of you, Sirius,” Remus said in a softer tone.

Remus began drifting off into sleep, holding Sirius close to him when a small voice pulled him back into the waking world. “Do you think Regulus and I will ever be better then what we are right now?”

“Is that what you want,” Remus asked into the dark and he felt Sirius nod against his chest.

“I really miss him.”

Remus kissed the top of his head. “Then yeah, I think so. It’s going to take a lot of time, and effort, but, there’s nothing you can’t do. But you have to start talking about your feelings first before using my friend in a heist to hurt him. You both have to stop hurting each other as a first instinct.”

Sirius seemed to sit with those words for a minute.

“Have I ever told you how lucky I am to have you,” Sirius asked finally, kissing the side of his neck.

“Yes,” Remus hummed sleepily, his heart feeling warm and full. “I’m just as lucky to have you too.”

“When we’re done with this heist, I’m going to buy us a flat in London and you can go back to university and make me stellar lattes in the meantime. And I’ll be your super sexy trophy husband who rides a motorbike and keeps the house clean and stuff.”

Remus let out a low laugh. “That sounds like a plan.”

“And we’ll have giant dinner parties where we’ll invite Frank and Alice and Pandora and my brother and James. I’m not entirely sure how that’s going to work out, but we’ll figure it out. I think we could work out a lot over a nice bottle of wine and a nice dinner.”

“James and I will mediate,” Remus smiled, “or pull our money together to buy you two the best therapist in the world.”

Sirius laughed at this. “I think we’ll need a team of therapists. Or you know, a really good wine, like I said. Maybe two bottles of really good wine.”

Soon Remus drifted off into a dreamless sleep.

The next two weeks passed with a quick ease. Sirius had talked to Regulus, which had gone surprisingly well. Well, as well as it could’ve gone between the two brothers. They had talked for nearly three hours, and Sirius had come back and immediately fallen asleep in Remus’ lap afterwards. Emotionally taxing conversations always prompted long naps for Sirius. Remus thought that they were making more progress than either of them were giving themselves credit for, though it was evident it was difficult. He also suspected that James was swaying Regulus heavily on the other side of things to be more amicable and patient.

In class, Regulus had opened the idea of James working in the basement with Sirius up to everyone to discuss and talk through. The consensus was that if James’ help would make the heist more profitable and successful, then he should participate. To Regulus’ credit, he approved the idea with ease and decorum before moving on to the lesson for that day. Remus knew that James working on the heist bothered him, he knew from the night Regulus had stormed into his room and started a fight with Sirius, just how bothered he was. It almost made Remus respect him more, knowing that Regulus wasn’t letting his personal feelings affect the heist. He was following through on his promise. It also felt nice that he was opening up decisions to the entire group. Regulus was giving them more agency as the heist approached and Remus wasn’t the only one who appreciated this. Remus himself wasn’t worried in the slightest either that James would be working with Sirius. He trusted Sirius to keep James safe and vice versa. He also thought that if the practice heist was anything to go on, James was the perfect man for the job. He was more than capable, and there was something exciting about working together on the night of the heist. James always had a calming presence.

During the first week of classes after the heist, Sirius and James became nearly inseparable. Which was very annoying to Remus and even Regulus would sometimes cast an annoyed glance their way. They sat next to each other and whispered plans about the heist that were so miniscule and unimportant, Remus fought the urge to tell both of them to shut up.

They would brainstorm codenames for one another and names for their part of the heist. Currently, they called it ‘Operation Storage’ which Marlene openly mocked as the most uncreative name in the history of heists, so they went back to the drawing board.

Sirius was also insisting that they wear all black and that they coordinate their outfits for the night of the heist and James would actually write down these ideas to discuss later.

Regulus must have been just as annoyed by these antics, because by the second week of classes after the heist, he had moved James to another room to begin working on opening bank accounts in all of their names to begin the laundering process.

As the time drew nearer to the night of the heist, the atmosphere changed. Everyone seemed to take on a much more sombre demeanour and they put all of their effort into classes. Regulus’ dark circles seemed to grow more prominent under his eyes, and he always seemed to be carrying a cup of coffee with him. Marlene had asked Remus if they could meet after class to practise unframing paintings some more and to discuss strategies. Even Peter had stopped playing chess with Remus as often and instead opted to practice sutures and read up on his large anatomy and medical books that he had brought with him. Lily and Mary had finished painting all of their fakes, but both of them would still retreat into their studio space and paint to calm their nerves or to talk about their plans for the heist.

The only people who seemed entirely unaffected by the rising tension were Barty and Evan. Remus was fairly certain they could go through a tsunami and remain unaffected and just as calm as ever.

The rising tension was also the main reason that Remus found himself in Sirius’ room late one night, reading to him from a book of Regulus’. Remus had taken it from the library and made sure that it was an unannotated one. He really didn’t want to get on his bad side anymore.

Sirius was leaned up against Remus, reading over his shoulder as Remus read aloud softly. It was a calming activity for both of them and provided a sense of normalcy with a rapidly approaching crime-filled deadline.

“Wait what is that noise,” Sirius interrupted, holding perfectly still to hear better.

Remus paused his reading, listening too, and sure enough faint music could be heard coming from downstairs. “I think someone is having a dance party,” Remus supplied, smiling lightly.

“Hmm, without us? How dare they,” Sirius grinned grabbing him by the wrist and pulling him up from the bed.

“Sirius,” Remus laughed lightly, throwing his book on the bed. “We don’t want to be rude.”

“Oh come on. The best parties are crashed parties anyway,” Sirius grinned, leading them down the stairs, stumbling and laughing.

They both stepped into the kitchen and stopped in their tracks to take in the scene in front of them. There was James, standing atop the counter, serenading Regulus using a wooden spoon

as a microphone. His shirt was all the way unbuttoned and he was wearing socks that allowed him to slip and slide as he danced on the countertop while the radio blared.

“Set my alarm, turn on my charm! That’s because I’m a good old fashioned loverboy,” James was singing loudly.

“Your feet are on my counter. That is so unsanitary James Potter,” Regulus laughed. “Get down!”

There was a brief minute when neither of them had noticed Sirius and Remus enter. It was a sweet moment where James was being his usual self, but Remus had never seen Regulus so enraptured. He was quite literally, beaming up at James, not even bothering to look annoyed despite his protests as James skillfully avoided Regulus’ attempts to pull him down off the counter. Remus was struck by the genuine look Regulus was giving James and it all began making sense to him. All the times James would blush or sigh or break out into a wide smile when talking about Regulus, it was never one sided. Remus just hadn’t seen the other side.

“I’d like for you and I to go romancing,” James crooned, “Say the word, your wish is my command.” He brandished his arms in a wide sweeping motion for emphasis.

Regulus rolled his eyes, still smiling widely but then movement from Sirius caught his attention and he turned around quickly.

His smile dropped instantly, but James grinned at the both of them from the countertop. “Welcome to the party you two.”

“James, I told you we were too loud,” Regulus shook his head, instantly turning more serious. “I apologise if we woke the both of you. We’ll turn it off now.”

James was now using his spoon as a guitar in the background and Sirius broke out into a wide smile. Remus was also vaguely aware that he was smiling as well. Normally, James had to be incredibly drunk before he acted like this much of a fool.

“No. Don’t stop on our account,” Sirius shook his head. “This is a really good look for you Regulus, you actually look like you're having fun for once.”

Regulus glared at him, but Sirius was too busy pulling Remus in to dance to notice. He began to join in with James’ singing as Remus let himself be pulled all around the kitchen, swept up into a sudden dance.

“When I’m not with you, think of you always,” James grinned, jumping off the counter and picking Regulus up in a massive spin.

“When I’m not with you, think of me always,” Sirius sang with a wide smile. “Love you, Love youuu.”

Remus couldn’t help the laugh of delight that escaped his lips as Sirius attempted to dip him low. Neither him nor James were dancing to the music at all and both Remus and Regulus just let themselves be pulled along in their sweeping movements.

It was good. It was sweet. It was a moment where no one had to worry about the heist or the future or being perfect. For a minute, they were all just foolish kids again, dancing ridiculously around the kitchen and having fun. They could've been in university from an outsiders point of view, all meeting at a friends place for dinner that dissolved into antics. It was a nice thought.

"Are we having a party," Marlene's voice carried from the entryway.

"I love dance parties," Dorcas smiled.

"We aren't," Regulus said quickly.

"Yeah, we are," James smiled at the same time.

Just then the song changed and Waterloo began blasting through the speakers. Remus let out a loud groan as Dorcas and Marlene squealed in delight.

"Don't tell me you hate ABBA," Sirius gasped out. "Everyone loves ABBA."

James was back on the countertop and had somehow convinced Regulus to get up there with him, though he wasn't dancing. James had ditched his wooden spoon and instead had taken both of Regulus' hands in an attempt to get him to dance, but his feet remained firmly planted. Remus almost wanted to leave James and Regulus alone so that Regulus could go back to the carefree person he was moments before they arrived. Even though he was still looking at James with that soft look in his eyes, he had become more reserved since having more people show up. James shuffled around him, still serenading him as he held Regulus' shoulders and lightly rocked him back and forth in an attempt to make him dance. To James' credit, Regulus appeared to now be fighting a small smile.

Marlene and Dorcas had taken it upon themselves to put on a private concert for all of them complete with lots of dancing and dramatic singing.

"I don't hate ABBA I just–" but Sirius cut him off by kissing him.

"Sorry. I had to stop you while you were ahead," he laughed.

"We heard ABBA," Lily came bounding into the kitchen followed by Peter. "So we're here."

Peter grinned looking at all of them, "I love ABBA."

Sirius gave Remus a pointed look and they both laughed.

Soon, the kitchen was full of everyone dancing and laughing and singing at the top of their lungs and Remus let himself get swept up in Sirius until the early light of morning began peaking through the windows and they went up to bed, both feeling lighter and even younger than before.

Chapter End Notes

James dancing on the kitchen countertops is something that is so personal to ME! I don't care if it's corny!

Chapter 27: (da Vinci) The Last Supper

Chapter Summary

I bring you mum and dad James and Marlene, emo son Sirius, and tipsy Regulus

Chapter Notes

tw: slight alcohol consumption nothing major

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"That's you," Remus mumbled as the incessant knocking continued on his bedroom door.

Sirius opted for his usual ignore it and it will go away approach. He let out a small grunt and then pulled the covers tighter around himself.

"Sirius," Remus groaned, swatting at him slightly with his hand. The blows landed only half the time as Remus fumbled around, trying to make contact with his eyes still closed. "It's James outside that door. I promise you, he is not going to go away."

To prove his point, James' voice carried in the room from the other side of the door. "Remus, I really, really don't want to go in there, please. I was brave enough to open Sirius' door but it was empty. I don't want to see anything I shouldn't, but I will come in! We're going to be late."

"Sirius, I swear to God, get the hell up, some of us are trying to sleep," Remus cut in again, more agitated. "He's coming James," Remus shouted loudly and Sirius let out a prolonged sigh, psyching himself up to get out of bed.

"He's bloody mental," Sirius groaned, flinging his feet over the side of the bed and onto the floor before he opened his eyes, blinking rapidly to adjust to the sudden brightness of the room. "Who gets up this early to go to the grocery store?"

"Just be thankful it's James here this morning and not McKinnon. She'd probably be in here banging pots and pans together," Remus mumbled before burying his face back into his pillow.

Sirius got up and went through the motions of getting ready before meeting James and Marlene down in the kitchen. James was chattering away, looking his usual self, but Marlene

was glaring at him with drooping eyelids. It seemed Sirius wasn't the only one who wasn't a morning person.

"Oh perfect, you're here. We can go now," James smiled once Sirius had entered. He tossed the car keys up in the air and they clattered against each other before he caught them in the palm of his hand.

They filed out one after the other, with James in the lead as he sat in the driver's seat and Marlene slid into the passenger seat. Normally, Sirius would complain about having to sit in the back, but this morning he laid down across the entire back row and used it as a makeshift bed. He could always make the best of things when he needed too.

"I just think it's unfair Regulus trusts you with the car and the money and the brother," Marlene snorted, looking at James. "I think I'm much more equipped to handle all of these things."

"Speaking as the brother," Sirius interjected quickly as James pulled out into the street, "no one is handling me. I don't need to be handled."

"This is the first time Regulus is letting you outside of the house and out into public and he literally sent James with you. Not even Barty or Evan but James," Marlene looked back at him with raised eyebrows.

"No offence taken at all Marlene, thank you so much," James muttered, gripping the steering wheel a little tighter.

"What if you run away or ask people in the grocery to help you or contact your cop friends or–"

"Yeah, keep giving him ideas why don't you," James cut in more tersely as he eyed Sirius nervously through the rearview mirror.

"I'm not going to do anything," Sirius cried indignantly, fighting the urge to sit up. "What the fuck does it take to prove to you all that I'm not going to do anything!"

Everyday Sirius felt as if he was walking on eggshells. He knew everything he said and did or didn't say and didn't do was analysed and picked apart by ten other people, well nine. With Remus all he had to be was himself. Remus never seemed worried about trusting Sirius now that he had been officially integrated into the heist, and sometimes he was the only one who seemed to sympathise with him and support him. It was a small kindness that Remus granted him, but one he was infinitely grateful for. He was getting tired of having to prove himself to everyone else.

"Uh Regulus, I'm going to need your boyfriend down here to help me with the heist," Marlene mocked in a fake deep voice. "You call that not doing anything?"

"I don't sound like that," Sirius grumbled. "And Regulus and I talked about that already."

Well, he and Regulus had yelled about it. And then talked about it. And then yelled about it some more. Regulus was very sensitive when it came to James. If sensitive was the right word. Maybe volatile; volatile seemed more fitting. He would ricochet between seeming unaffected when Sirius brought up James to being almost possessive and protective. He knew it was because of how they were raised. Their parents would exploit any weakness they could possibly find and Walburga Black believed love made you weaker than most. She would use Sirius' and Regulus' love for one another against them. She would use it as a way of manipulating them in order to get whatever she wanted. She used Regulus' love for her against him, as a means to exploit him, and eventually love became so mangled and distorted under her grasp, it was unrecognisable. Which is probably why Regulus wanted to hide James away, to avoid the warping that had touched virtually everyone in the Black family. That was something at the very least Sirius could understand.

"Speaking as the boyfriend, I would like to change the subject now," James strained. "And I would like to apologise, Sirius. If Regulus trusts you to go out, so do I."

"Does he trust me?" Sirius found it hard to believe. He also found it hard sometimes to see past James as an extension of Regulus. They couldn't be more different, but he was working on the heist, and had been enthusiastic about it since the beginning presumably, which meant James had questionable ideals to say the least. The idea that James was working to push whatever agenda Regulus wanted wasn't far fetched.

Still, in spite of this, Sirius had taken an instant liking to him. He was down to Earth and lighthearted, which was refreshing. They also had a similar sense of humour and he would often laugh at the same things Sirius would laugh at in class. It was easy to get along with him. Sometimes he found himself wishing they had met under different circumstances, like at a pub or in university. Maybe then things could've been different, friendship-wise. If had known James removed from everything; removed from his brother. But then again, maybe not, he didn't know.

"I think he's trying," James eyed him pointedly through the mirror again, "to trust you. Why else would you be in the backseat right now?"

Sirius didn't respond, instead he opted to try and sleep some more until they arrived at the grocery store. This, however, proved an unsuccessful attempt. Although James was a gentle enough driver, Marlene seemed more awake and ready to talk, which prevented Sirius from being able to drift off.

"Can we stop and get coffee? I'm still tired," she whined.

James sighed. "It's not on Regulus' list of instructions."

"Tell him I'll pay him back when the heist is over. I'm good for the money," she countered with an amused laugh.

"Not on the instruction list. Regulus said go to the grocery store only and come straight back home. We only have an hour and a half."

"Do you always do whatever Regulus says? Don't you ever want to live a little?"

“And you wonder why he left me in charge of the keys and the money.”

Sirius noted how this time he left out the word brother and he smiled to himself.

“He did that because you’re sleeping with him,” Marlene responded quickly.

“Or because I follow the rules, McKinnon.”

“You were literally breaking the rules by fucking him behind our backs for–”

“Okay, hello, I am still back here. The brother. I would very much like to request a change of subject now,” Sirius cut in, closing his eyes tighter as if that would stop him from hearing whatever it was that Marlene was saying.

“Sorry,” James mumbled and Marlene quickly moved on to talking about Dorcas and where they were going to live once the heist was over.

“Regulus wants me to remind you both to use your American accents,” James said once they pulled into the grocery store.

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me,” Sirius groaned. “It is too fucking early for all of this.”

“It’s half past eight in the morning,” James retorted as if that was a perfectly reasonable time to put on a fake accent and buy some lettuce.

“Remind me why we’re doing this so early again,” Marlene scoffed as James pushed the cart through the aisles while looking at the list. Marlene was glancing at the list over his shoulder and throwing things into the cart intermittently.

“Regulus thought it would be nice if all had one giant final meal together before the heist happens. It’ll ease everyone’s nerves. We’ve all been a little tense recently. And, I collected everyone’s food preferences since we’re in charge of cooking everything tonight and it’s a lot so we’ll be busy all day. Best to start bright and early.”

Sirius couldn’t take either of them seriously with their horrible fake accents. He felt like a moody teenager following insolently behind James and Marlene with his arms crossed. All he needed was some music to drown out the surrounding noise.

“On that note,” James continued eyeing the list with slight concern, “does anyone know how to grill salmon?”

They continued down the aisles and Sirius played a little game of guessing what food each person requested. Regulus was easy enough. Blackberries and red wine with a fancy label. Remus was easy too, various chocolate assorted items were always attributed to him and, and he had a feeling the ingredients to make margherita pizza were also Remus’ idea. The others were a toss up. Pasta went to Barty and Evan and so did the oranges. The pink sparkling wine went to Marlene. The salmon was for Lily, limes and sourdough bread for Mary. He would be interested to see how many he got right tonight at dinner.

Because James was James, he also was buying fresh flowers and candles to create what he called an atmospheric mood– whatever that meant. Sirius was just happy that he would finally be able to drink wine again tonight.

Sirius followed the both up and down the different aisles, not bothering to talk much. He was too tired, the grocery store was blasting freezing cold air, and all he wanted to do was crawl back under the warm covers with Remus and sleep.

They were almost done shopping when a streak of stark blonde hair caught his eye turning down the next aisle over. His heart began to hammer in his chest and his mouth went dry. If he wasn't mistaken, he would almost say that Pandora Lovegood had just slipped out of his sight and down another aisle. He had stopped walking entirely and James and Marlene were getting further away from him as they laughed amicably with one another.

Pandora wasn't here, was she? It was possible that she had found more information; Sirius had no idea what she and Frank had uncovered since he'd joined the heist. She was staying in the area, but Sirius hadn't been out in public for his face to be captured on security cameras or street corner lights, so what were the odds that she was here, at this grocery store at the same time as him? His stomach was somersaulting. If she was here, it wasn't a good sign. He wasn't certain it was her though, he had only seen the back of her head.

Before he could think any more about it, he turned on his heel and walked towards the aisle she had disappeared down. If it was her, and he found her, then he had no idea what he would do or say. He just needed to know for sure if she was actually here. He wouldn't be able to rest until then.

The aisle containing a million different boxes of cereal was empty and Sirius rounded the next one to see rows of microwavable popcorn, also empty. Where in the world did this woman disappear too? He began picking up the pace to the point where he was almost running down the aisles, becoming increasingly overwhelmed and frustrated with the size of the grocery store, until he ran face first into Marlene McKinnon who grabbed him by the arm so tightly and glared at him so fiercely Sirius felt like a very young boy again.

"I was just looking for–" he began breathlessly but Marlene cut him off.

"You mother fucker. You wonder why no one trusts you around here? Why you have to keep proving yourself? It's because you run off and do shady shit like this. Did you fucking speak to anyone," she hissed, still not loosening her death grip on his arm as she pulled him through the aisles.

"No, I didn't. I didn't. I swear," Sirius blinked, trying to catch his breath, still reeling and looking around for the girl who might be Pandora.

"I turn my back for one second and you're gone. I swear to God, in three days, you're going to be in a museum basement with James and if you fucking do anything to him, or this heist, I will skin you alive Sirius Black. I don't trust you for one second," she whispered lowly into his ear.

Everyone in this goddamn place really fucking cared about James Potter apparently.

Including Remus , a small voice in his head added.

“I know what it looks like, but I didn't do anything Marlene, I promise. I’m sorry,” he added as Marlene dragged him to the checkout line where James was paying.

Sirius expected James to glare at him like Marlene or give him that nervous look he sometimes did as if Sirius were a wild animal that could attack at any moment, but instead James just looked disappointed. Sirius wasn’t sure why that was worse, or why it bothered him so much.

He helped load the groceries in the car and silently they began the drive back to the house.

“I thought I saw someone I used to work with. Someone who was on my team, my old team,” Sirius heard himself say into the silence. He stared out the car window as the trees went by in a green blur. “I didn’t get a good look at her, so I ran off to see if it was really her. If she was here, it would’ve been bad news.”

Neither Marlene or James moved, as they kept their eyes on the road.

“What would you have done if it was her,” James asked after a moment. It was clear that it was a loaded question.

“I don’t know,” Sirius answered honestly. “I don’t know. I’d try to hide maybe. I– I didn’t really have a plan.”

Marlene scoffed disbelievingly. “Yeah, right. You expect us to believe that you saw a colleague, one who has the very real potential to stop this heist from happening, and one who can save you, and you were going to hide from her?”

Sirius felt anger begin to creep in. He was telling the truth, possibly at the expense of Pandora, and he was still being treated with disdain. He was about to open his mouth to make a sharp comment when James beat him to it.

“I believe him,” he said firmly.

Marlene let out a noise of irritation. “How do you know he’s not lying?”

James shrugged lightly, “I can just tell. I think he’s telling the truth.”

Sirius felt a wave of relief wash over him. At least James believed him. That counted for something.

“Are you going to tell Regulus,” he asked quietly. Not that he cared if James did tell Regulus, he just needed to be prepared for the long and emotionally laborious fight that would ensue after James told Regulus.

“That you ran off in the grocery store for two minutes? No. But I think it’s important to mention that you might have seen someone you used to work with at the grocery store. He could probably have Dorcas check the cameras to confirm. It’s something that could pose a

risk to our operation and the safety of everyone on the heist," James responded looking at Sirius in the mirror.

Sirius nodded. It sounded reasonable enough. "Okay, sure."

"If it was her, or even if it wasn't and you just thought it was, I'm sure it wasn't easy. Seeing her in there. I'm sorry," James added.

Sirius felt his throat tighten slightly. Just that small acknowledgement made him feel as if he wasn't crazy. Pandora was a colleague and on her way to becoming a close friend. It wasn't easy, it wasn't easy in the slightest and at least James knew that. Maybe that was why everyone here loved him. He noticed things other people couldn't be bothered with. He cared.

"Thank you, James," Sirius responded sincerely.

The rest of the car ride was spent in silence, even from Marlene who still didn't seem happy about the earlier events. When they got back to the house, James went to give the keys back to Regulus and he and Marlene began to unload the groceries.

"Just so you know, I call working outside. I can grill everything that needs to be grilled or whatever. So good luck finding your own place to cook."

"What's that supposed to mean, I'll just cook in the kitchen with James," Sirius snorted, laying all the produce out on the counter.

"Yeah, good luck with that," Marlene sang and she bounded up the stairs. "Rosier, Crouch," her voice carried dimly throughout the house, "do either of you know where the grill is? And how to use it?"

Sirius busied himself by laying out all the groceries on the counter until James came back, humming to himself.

"Okay heist partner, how can I help," he began, looking at all of the ingredients.

"Hmm," James furrowed his eyebrows. "Oh, um you can start grilling things later when it gets closer to dinner." James responded decisively.

"Marlene's already doing that," Sirius sighed.

James let out a loud laugh. "No, Marlene's help ended at going to the grocery store. She burns bread, she shouldn't be near a grill."

Sirius shrugged, "well she's asking Barty and Evan for help right now."

"Oh, perfect, they won't let her mess things up," he began absentmindedly, looking around the kitchen. "I'm going to work on dessert first and then maybe you can come in later and chop the vegetables. After I'm done."

“That’s fine, I can just get started now,” Sirius smiled, eager to be useful after the grocery store fiasco.

James seemed to hesitate for a moment before nodding, “okay sure.”

Sirius got to work quickly, washing the vegetables and rummaging around the kitchen for knives and a cutting board.

James seemed to be everywhere at once with flour and sugar and creaming the butter and eggs and heating the oven. Sirius could hardly keep up.

“How should I chop these,” he asked standing over the fresh produce contemplatively. When James didn’t answer, Sirius looked over and tried asking again.

“Uh, here’s the list,” James placed a piece of paper in front of Sirius absentmindedly before turning back to mix something in a large bowl.

Sirius scanned over the paper quickly before he began working. He did his best to make conversation with James which normally came so easily to the both of them, but now it seemed that James was unreasonably short and irritated when Sirius would speak, though he would always do his best to respond politely.

People would wander in from time to time which only seemed to annoy James more. Sirius was getting the sneaking suspicion that James wanted to be entirely alone.

“Ah, I see they’re trusting you with the knives now, congratulations,” Mary cast him an amused smile as she floated in to get some water.

Sirius let out a small laugh despite himself, and continued the rhythmic chopping. “Upgrades I suppose. I’ll take what I can get.”

After Mary left, Sirius attempted to make himself as useful as possible with James as they worked in tandem in the kitchen.

This is how Regulus found them an hour later, standing side by side. Sirius had a pile of chopped vegetables on the counter and James had several things in the oven that smelled wonderful, and he was working on something else.

“Which I think is just preposterous and– oh are you sure you want to put that much salt in?” Sirius was looking over James’ shoulder and prattling on.

James looked up at Regulus with a gaze of murderous intent and it took all of Regulus’ self restraint to not laugh right then and there.

“Sirius, Dorcas needs you upstairs,” Regulus interrupted. “She has the footage pulled from the grocery store this morning and needs you to make an identification.” Truthfully, Dorcas was still working on pulling the footage, but Regulus reckoned Sirius could go up there and watch her work for a while to give James some respite.

“She works that quickly,” Sirius responded, his eyebrows shooting up in surprise. “She’s good.”

Regulus prompted him by nodding towards the stairs. “I’ll help James finish up in here.”

“Sure, whatever,” Sirius shrugged. He grabbed a carrot, popping it into his mouth with a satisfying crunch before he headed out.

James gave him a little smile before mouthing his thanks. He looked so lovely standing there in the kitchen, with a small smudge of flour on his face and his shirt sleeves rolled up to his elbows. He was so lovely, and he was Regulus’ boyfriend.

“I’m just here to make some tea, and then I promise I’ll get out of your way,” Regulus did his best to tear his eyes away from James as he went to the kettle.

“You can stay if you’d like,” James hummed absentmindedly. “I don’t mind at all when it’s you.”

Regulus felt his cheeks heat up slightly and he smiled at James’ words as they warmed him more than a cup of tea ever could. He couldn’t believe he had let James Potter make him into such a ridiculous person.

Regulus couldn’t stay though. He made his tea quickly and left to take care of a million other things. The day passed by with the rapid ease of productivity as Regulus employed everyone's help in setting up the backyard. They brought out a long table and set up candles and flowers and set the table. They pulled out chairs and arranged them in the grass and argued over what radio station to play during dinner. Barty was ultimately the one who grilled with the help of Lily as Marlene assumed a ‘supervisory role’ that suited everyone much better since she no longer had to work directly with fire.

Eventually, he found himself helping James run all the food out to the table as people gathered around and sat down eagerly. Regulus was glad that he was doing this. It was the last dinner they would all have when they could be carefree for an evening. After this, there would be no group dinners. Regulus knew he would have everyone working on different things at different times to tie up loose ends and to ensure last minute cohesiveness. So this, for all intents and purposes, was the last supper.

Everyone took a look at the spread on the table and laughed to themselves. It was a conglomeration of everyone’s different requests and salmon sat beside pizza and pasta carbonara. Salads and mashed potatoes were coupled with fruits and assorted cheese and crackers. James had made two cakes and muffins, which Regulus didn’t even have to look at to know that they were orange.

“So I take it you waved the alcohol ban,” Marlene grinned as she began pouring herself a glass of wine.

“Just for tonight,” Regulus looked around. “In a few days, we will all be in New York, but tonight is for drinking and having fun. You have all worked incredibly hard and I have every faith in each and everyone of you and all of us collectively as a team. We’re about to make

history, so consider this a pre-celebration of sorts," he did his best to smile and motioned for everyone to begin eating.

"A pre-celebration or a last meal," Barty laughed as Regulus glared at him over his poor choice of words.

"When's the bonfire brother? Is that tonight," Sirius called to him from the other end of the table as the clattering of utensils and soft hum of conversation began as everyone began passing around the food. Sirius had been a part of enough small-scale heists to know the established routine.

"No, the bonfire is tomorrow morning at five. I need you all out here bright and early. Make sure you bring all of your notes, writings, diagrams, anything pertaining to the heist must be burned. I don't want a single shred of evidence left behind that is that clear," Regulus spoke loudly, commanding the attention of the table once more.

Everyone nodded quickly.

"If there's any doubt in your mind about whether or not something pertains to the heist burn it. Soon you'll all have enough money to replace anything you could possibly want anyway," Regulus emphasised. He would do a final sweep through of the house once the bonfire happened to ensure that no one had missed anything, but it would make his job exponentially easier if everyone could get everything the first time around.

Everyone returned quickly to their conversations and shared food amongst one another.

James reached for a bottle of wine and Regulus shook his head quickly before he reached for a different bottle. "James, drink this one, it's the best one here," he prompted pouring some into James' glass.

"Thanks," James smiled from his spot next to Regulus and took a small sip. "Although, I have to confess I know nothing about wine, so I'm afraid your fine and expensive taste is wasted on me."

"You can't tell the difference between that and," Regulus paused for a moment pouring a cheaper wine into his glass before he handed it to James to sample. "And this?"

"Hm," James nodded after drinking from both cups, "they both taste like wine to me."

"I'll add a wine tasting tour to our list of things to do after the heist," Regulus shook his head amusedly before filling his cup with the nice bottle of red wine he specifically requested.

"Ooh, we should do it in Italy," James nodded in excitement.

Everyone had begun eating and talking amicably, and before he knew it, the sun was setting and everyone had more than their fair share of wine, including Regulus.

One pointed look at Sirius let him know that the woman in the store this morning wasn't Pandora. He shook his head at Regulus from the other end of the table, and even Dorcas claimed she believed he was telling the truth, though Regulus hated that he couldn't ever be

one hundred percent certain. Soon, he found himself falling into easy conversations with people about plans for after the heist and book recommendations and favourite places to visit around the world. It was nice to have a normal conversation with everyone not solely centred around the heist.

Then, when Regulus had hit a lull in conversation, he sat back contentedly, feeling warm and relaxed from the wine. He let the cool air hit his face and he closed his eyes for a moment, relishing in the serene feeling.

James leaned in and whispered softly in his ear after a few moments of silence, prompting him to open his eyes again. “You did a good thing here Regulus,” he gave him a lopsided grin. “I mean, look at all of this. Look at all of us here, together. All the love.”

Regulus took a long look down the table and tried to see it through James’ eyes. Everyone was cast in a warm yellow glow as the cool summer air danced around them. Soft music thrummed in the background and the crickets chirped in the night. The scent of flowers and good food filled the air as Evan and Barty whispered together genially with their heads drawn together closely. Marlene was in Dorcas’ lap with her arms wrapped around the other girl laughing loudly, dodging Peter’s attempts to throw small pieces of bread at her, no doubt for saying something raunchy and inappropriate. Lily and Remus were engaged in an animated debate as Sirius and Mary watched them both, adding in their opinions and interjections from time to time to further spur on the conversation. Everyone was light and happy and their cheeks were all rosy and their eyes were bright with drink and mirth.

“James you find the good in everyone and everything,” Regulus murmured softly, feeling the effects of the wine more strongly. “It’s lovely– you’re lovely,” Regulus echoed his earlier thoughts he had in the kitchen outloud. “I know I don’t say it enough but you are so so so lovely, James.” Regulus felt the words leave him with an unusual ease, it was nice.

His words caused James to blush which was entirely unbearable for Regulus, so he leaned over and planted a kiss right on the apple of his pretty pink cheek to seal the deal, which only caused him to blush even deeper. Regulus was sure he was going to combust.

“Where is your star Regulus,” James murmured once he had gotten over his momentary flusteredness.

“What,” Regulus blinked in surprise.

“Your star,” James pointed up at the glittering night sky. “I want to know which one it is, so I can always find it and see you. I keep meaning to ask you which one it is, but I always forget.”

“Oh, um,” Regulus looked up, his head feeling heavy with drink and James’ words. “It’s that one,” Regulus pointed after searching the expanse of sky. “Though technically it’s not *my* star. It’s in the constellation Leo, see?”

“Yeah, that’s not helpful. You could be pointing at like twenty different stars right now,” James shook his head trying to follow Regulus’ point.

“Oh come on, it’s the brightest one where I’m pointing!” He turned to look at James and smiled at the look on his face. James shook his head in confusion. “Hm, I’ll show you another time when it’s easier to see I promise,” he lowered his arm, giving up for the moment.

“Sure, but I’m holding you to it,” James smiled good naturedly and returned Regulus’ kiss on the cheek.

Everyone fell into easy conversation drinking and laughing that turned louder as the night went on. At some point during the evening, James had reached over and grabbed Regulus’ hand under the table. He was fiddling with Regulus’ rings, twisting them on his fingers absentmindedly, while he talked to Barty about designer cars they could buy after the heist. At some points in the conversation, James would bring Regulus’ hand to his lips and kiss his palm or his fingertips or his knuckles softly. Even though Regulus was engaged in conversation with Dorcas and James was still talking to Barty, it was his way of letting Regulus know he was there and it gave Regulus butterflies every single time.

“Regulus, would you do me the extreme honour of dancing with me on this very fine evening,” James’ warm voice pulled him from the conversation he was having with Dorcas and Peter a little while later.

He noticed that Barty and Evan had turned the radio up and had gotten up from the table. They were running and stumbling around the yard trying to catch fireflies as they sang and laughed drunkenly into the night.

Remus and Sirius had drifted off too, they were laying in the grass a little ways off and Sirius was pointing at the sky, no doubt showing Remus all the constellations he could think of.

“Well, go on,” Dorcas implored smiling at him as she tried to keep Marlene from falling out of her lap. “Don’t leave him waiting like that.”

Regulus turned to look at James who was beaming at him with the brightest smile he had ever seen, and he couldn’t refuse. He would blame his eagerness to agree on the wine if he needed to.

They both got up from the table and he let James lead him to a more secluded area in the grass with enough space to move around freely.

“James, I can’t dance. Just so you know,” Regulus admitted as James pulled him close.

“You mean to tell me the great and wonderful Regulus Black, who knows everything, doesn’t know how to dance?” His fingertips traced lightly over Regulus’ jaw and he did his best not to sigh at James’ touch.

“Well of course I can dance in the traditional ballroom sense. I know how to do the Viennese Waltz and I can Foxtrot but–”

“Regulus–”

“I’m not, that is, I don’t know how to–”

“Regulus,” James interrupted with a light laugh. “You’re already doing it.”

Regulus stopped talking and noticed that he was swaying slightly in tandem with James to the music. He was letting James guide him and he stopped thinking about it and just trusted in James to lead him.

“Oh,” Regulus breathed out softly, “this is nice.”

James hummed in agreement before kissing the top of Regulus’ head. All around them, laughter and drunken singing filled the air. It was such a nice moment where Regulus didn’t have to worry about anything. He could think about the heist and the logistics and the safety of everyone and everything else tomorrow, but tonight he was just a singular person with no expectations and no pressure. He was just a boy dancing with his boyfriend in the candlelit night and he was suddenly overcome with emotion.

“What are you thinking about love,” James murmured and Regulus wrapped his arms tighter around him. The term of endearment never failed to make Regulus weak in the knees, and James knew it, which is why he used it whenever it fancied him.

Regulus felt his heart begin to race, it was the perfect time and he knew it was right. He was sure of himself, but it still made him incredibly afraid. “I, um, I’m going to tell you something but I need you to let me finish everything first. It’s not a big deal,” and then Regulus grimaced at the poor choice of words. “No, that’s not what I meant. It is a big deal actually, I meant–”

James let out a little laugh and kissed his nose as they still swayed to the music. “It’s okay, take your time.”

“I love you,” Regulus began with as much bravery as he could muster. “So incredibly much James Potter, that it terrifies me.”

James had stopped swaying them now and they stood still underneath the moon, even though they were both still holding each other. Regulus continued quickly before James had a chance to speak.

“And I’m not even sure I know how to love you right, and my whole life, finding out what love looks like for me has been…difficult and complicated but with you,” Regulus took a deep breath in an attempt to get his heart to stop hammering in his throat. “With you it’s so easy. You make me smile and laugh and you make me do ridiculous things like pinky promise you things and I just feel warm and light whenever you’re around and so incredibly bright James, bright like the portrait you painted. I like who I am when I’m with you. And that’s love. I like your laugh and your kind eyes and the way that you see the good in everyone. And that’s love for me too. I love you, and I’m sorry I didn’t tell you sooner.”

Regulus stopped speaking. He was glad he was clinging on to James because they gave his hands something to do besides shake. Delicately, James brushed the curls out of his face and kissed him so tenderly Regulus had to fight the urge to cry.

“I know you love me Regulus, I know,” James whispered once he had pulled away. For a minute they both stared at each other, utterly lost for words. “Say it again,” James commanded softly, kissing Regulus quickly before pulling away.

Regulus took a moment to admire James, letting himself get lost in those big brown eyes that he loved so much. He was grinning something fierce and Regulus was nearly blinded by his radiance as he nodded.

“I love you. I love you,” Regulus smiled, and that time James picked him up and kissed him hard, spinning him around and around.

“I love you too. So much,” James put him down and Regulus laughed, trying to get his bearings again.

“Hey! Hey, what’s all this fanfare about,” Evan called out boisterously as he made his way over, flopping a heavy handed arm around Regulus’ shoulder. Barty followed closely behind with a lazy smile.

“Oh nothing major,” James began, his tone taking on a false nonchalance that made Regulus smile despite himself. “Regulus just told me he loved me outloud for the first time. No big deal.”

Barty’s eyes went wide as he snapped his head over to look at Regulus. “No he didn’t. No you didn’t.”

“Outloud? Love?” Evan produced an exaggerated frown, “Darling Reggie, when was the last time you told us you loved us?”

“I think when I was shot and almost died,” Barty snorted.

“Do you love him? Really? You can always take it back. There’s a one hour limit where you can take it back if you change your mind,” Evan looked at him with drunken sincerity.

“Aw where did you learn that from Evan? The special handbook on being the world’s biggest dick?” Barty shot back with a slight laugh, but Evan had already moved on to drilling James with questions.

“And you love Regulus?”

“Yes.”

“And you said it back?”

“Yes.”

“And you meant it with your entire heart and entire soul?”

“Yes,” James nodded again, not even laughing at the questions, but instead looking serious.

“Okay, that’s enough of this you two,” Regulus stopped their antics with a wave of his hand. “And for the record since things are going so swimmingly for me at the moment, I love the both of you too. You two are my family and I would be utterly devastated without the two of you,” Regulus looked back and forth between the two of them earnestly.

“Oh no, he’s pissed. It’s the wine talking,” Barty shook his head but he was smiling softly.

“He always gets so sappy when he’s drinking,” Evan added with a laugh. “For the record, we know you love us, we were just giving you a hard time.”

“First, I’m not drunk, I’m barely even tipsy, and second, I know you know, but it’s still nice to say it I suppose,” Regulus shrugged.

“What the fuck did you do to him,” Barty shook his head at James as James let out a little laugh.

Then without warning, both Evan and Barty shared a mischievous glance before they barrelled into Regulus and sat him atop both their shoulders, holding him up by his legs. Regulus did his best to hold on to them as they began marching around the lawn chanting loudly.

“Regulus loves us! You heard it here first, people! Regulus loves us so much!”

Both Barty and Evan were laughing loudly and Regulus subjected himself to their obnoxious display, allowing himself this one night.

He knew in 72 hours these people who trusted him would be thrust into peril in the throws of the biggest art heist this world has ever seen. He knew that everything would hinge on that moment that he sent his friends and family and people he loved into harm's way and he felt the weight of their trust in him nearly crush his chest everyday. But tonight, he was light. Tonight, he was looking at the prettiest boy he’d ever seen, a boy who he loved and who loved him. Tonight, he was on top of the shoulders of his best friends laughing with a stomach full of good wine and good food. Tonight, he had his brother laying in the grass a few feet away from him talking softly. Tonight, the moon was beaming silver and bright, there was laughter in the summer air, and he was happy.

Chapter End Notes

the heist is next chapter and then there is no rest until this fic is over which is exciting and also terrifying hahaha <3

*also Baby I'm Yours by the Arctic Monkeys is the song I had in mind playing in the background when James and Regulus dance but it can be whatever you want i just love that song and alex turner <3

Chapter 28: The Heist

Chapter Summary

> The dumbest group of smart people rob a museum for money and for fun. Unless you're Regulus Black, and then you're robbing a museum for very confusing and nuanced reasons that you don't even entirely understand yourself.

Chapter Notes

> tw: gun use/violence + blood
> Also! So so sorry this is uploaded later than scheduled, but better late than never right? haha, right? <33

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Regulus," James whispered into the dark room. He was unsure how long it had been since Regulus had turned out the lights and demanded they try to sleep. He knew it was past midnight, and that in less than twenty two hours he would be in a car driving to the Braxton museum in New York to pull off the largest art heist to date. A heist that his boyfriend had crafted and designed with meticulous care and detail. A heist that would change the world.

The house was entirely scrubbed clean of everything. James had helped strip the classrooms and art studios on the third floor bare and he filled them up with common household items. No one would be able to tell those rooms had been used for anything other than storage or guest bedrooms. He stood outside in the early morning and watched Regulus throw intricate floor plans and diagrams into a raging bonfire that Barty and Evan had built. He threw his own notes from months and months worth of classes into the fire and watched the flames lap them up eagerly. Any and everything that could have possibly been construed as evidence of the heist was destroyed. It hurt James to watch everything be consumed by the fire, his little notes he passed back and forth to Peter and Marlene, his doodles in the margins of art prints. Even Regulus looked a little paler than usual as he stood by and watched years of his life's work be reduced to smouldering ash.

They cleaned until the house was bare, until it appeared untouched and unlived in and vacant. They had packed up all of their clothes and belongings and their bags were ready to be loaded into one of the two black vans Regulus had procured for the heist. They scrubbed and scrubbed until all evidence of the past was non-existent. Regulus even had his family portraits and marble busts and other things packed up and shipped off in boxes. The house was unrecognisable.

To add on to that, James was splitting his time between opening up offshore accounts and banking statements in everyone's name and going over last minute arrangements with Sirius about the best way to approach museum storage. He barely had time to think, let alone time to sleep. But now that he had the opportunity, laying in bed at the advice of Regulus, he couldn't bring his heartbeat or his mind to slow down enough to drift off. Even Regulus' room became cold and imposing as it was devoid of all his posters and diagrams and painting details that James loved to look at so much.

"James you're supposed to be asleep," Regulus sighed, but James could tell by the clarity of Regulus' voice that he hadn't been close to drifting off either.

"Are you scared about the heist," James asked in a whisper.

"Are you," Regulus countered after a few beats of silence.

James thought to himself. When he agreed to this heist, when he agreed to take this job, Regulus had promised him a life free of boredom and excitement beyond his wildest imagination, and he had fulfilled that promise and then some. James had been directionless, his corporate job had left him listless and without purpose, and now, he felt so far removed from that person that he once was, it was hard to even imagine himself in that old context.

Excitement was always supposed to be his motivating factor, but the moment he stepped into the warehouse and laid eyes on Regulus, his motivating factor had shifted instantly. That was terrifying. Falling in love with Regulus was the most terrifying and exhilarating and exciting thing that he had ever done– that he would ever do; he was sure of it. What was a heist compared to that?

"I'm anxious I think," James answered at last. "More than afraid. I'm confident that we can do this, but I think it'll be good to have both my feet on the ground in the museum instead of being out here imagining what it'll be like. If that makes sense. I'm also really excited if you can believe it."

Regulus let out a soft laugh. "Strangely, I can believe it, brave and crazy thing that you are." He was silent for a little while tracing the outline of James' antler tattoo in the dark. It was a small habit of his, one that he had done so frequently now, he didn't even need to see it to know exactly where it was. "I'm not scared either," Regulus answered into the silence. "The only thing that scares me is something happening to one of you, but I would never let that happen." He sounded so self-assured and confident, James knew that he wasn't leaving room for error or uncertainty.

Still, he found himself saying, "it's me Reg, you can be honest with me. It's okay if you're scared or–"

"Well I'm not," he snapped quickly, before he let out a loud sigh. "I think we should just leave it alone tonight."

His hand had stopped tracing James' thigh and James nodded even though Regulus couldn't see him.

He thought about where he was at the beginning of this. He was a twenty three year old with no money, no job, and no semblance of a love life. He was bored and beaten down with monotony as he watched the last few numbers dwindle lower and lower in his bank account. And now? Now he had, quite literally, a houseful of new friends, a job that provided new twists and thrills every day, a bank account soon to be full of cash, and a person, his person, who made these things all possible.

“I love you Regulus,” James whispered.

He felt Regulus’ lips press gently against his shoulder. It was a gesture that made James’ stomach do somersaults.

“I love you.”

James hummed in sheer delight. *God, if his past self could see him now.*

They fell into an easy silence again, and James willed himself to try and sleep, but it was an impossible task.

“Regulus?”

He let out another trademark sigh. “You’re never going to sleep tonight are you?”

“Nope,” James smiled to himself. “Are you?”

“No. I suppose I’m not,” Regulus replied. James could feel Regulus shift as he got out of bed and began searching around the room in the dark.

“What are you doing?”

“Well if you can’t sleep and I can’t sleep, might as well go make some tea and not sleep in the kitchen,” Regulus responded as James switched on the lamp on the table next to him, just in time to see Regulus pull out a black t-shirt that happened to be James’ from one of his drawers.

“I was wondering where that shirt went. I had to sneak back to my room shirtless that day you know,” James laughed as Regulus threw it on over his head. “I only packed so many to begin with.”

“Sorry,” Regulus’ cheeks were tinged slightly pink. “It was just there and it smelled like you and I have a…proclivity for taking things that I want.”

James watched him for a minute. The shirt was already a little big on him, but Regulus was practically swimming in the fabric. James felt a soft smile overcome his features. “Oh, I know. It looks good on you; you should keep it.”

Regulus let out a soft hum and James got up quickly, grabbing his glasses and following him out to the kitchen. They padded through the house quietly and much to James’ surprise, there was a light already on, indicating that they weren’t alone.

Marlene and Dorcas were leaning against the kitchen countertops talking softly, but came to a stop as Regulus walked in.

“We were trying to sleep, but we couldn’t,” Dorcas explained quickly, looking at Regulus nervously.

“We couldn’t either,” James returned with a smile as Regulus moved towards the kettle.

“Would either of you like some tea,” he asked, quietly moving about the kitchen.

“Uh, yes please,” Dorcas nodded. Regulus went to the cabinet and carefully took down four mugs.

He moved diligently around the kitchen as Marlene watched him carefully, following his every move. She looked terrified and she was drumming her fingers against the counter anxiously. Even James could feel her anxiousness and fear from where he was standing. Just as she was about to speak, Regulus prematurely interrupted, his back still turned to her.

“Marlene, you’re the best person for this job. I wouldn’t have picked you if I didn’t know with one hundred percent certainty that you could do this. You were perfect during the trial run, you’ll be perfect later tonight,” he said flatly as if he were reciting facts from a novel.

Marlene seemed to calm at his words, although she did look slightly taken aback. “How did you know that I– how could you tell?”

“I could feel your eyes boring into the back of my head, McKinnon. Everyone has their moments. You’ll be fine,” Regulus turned around to stare at her with sincerity.

Soon, they were all standing around the kitchen drinking tea and talking quietly.

“I did really want to sleep. I can recognise the importance of a good night’s sleep,” Marlene was saying. “I just have all this energy you know?”

Dorcas nodded along encouragingly. “Yeah. I feel like I’m getting ready for the first day of school all over again.”

“Ah, first day of school jitters pale in comparison to pre-heist hysteria,” Sirius came bounding into the kitchen pulling Remus in tow by the hand.

Remus found a place next to James as Sirius leaned up against him. Instinctually, Remus wrapped his arms around him and kissed the top of his head. They were practically inseparable, James hardly saw one without the other, but he didn’t mind. It was nice to see Remus so happy and enthralled. It made him happy by proxy. Regulus on the other hand, was trying, but James would see how he stiffened or blinked quickly, looking away at their overt displays of affection sometimes. Often, he wondered if it was residual guilt.

“You remember, don’t you, Regulus?” Sirius continued. “The night of our first heist together, you came into my room. You were pacing incessantly. Back and forth, back and forth. I thought you were going to make a hole right through the floor, but you were still so quiet, so solemn. Always older than your actual age.”

“Hm, I remember,” Regulus murmured. “You would always stay up with me and try to distract me so I would calm down.”

“Yeah,” Sirius smiled softly. “I would tell you that, but secretly I was always nervous too. Calming you down helped calm me down.”

“Oh,” Regulus breathed out softly. He quickly took a long drink from his mug and James bit his lip to keep from smiling.

“I guess we’re keeping up the tradition then,” Sirius added absentmindedly as Remus squeezed him tightly.

“I’m not pacing. Do you see me pacing,” Regulus asked, raising an eyebrow.

“No. No, but you’re still acting like a person well beyond your years.”

“He’s just an old soul,” Dorcas chimed in with a smile. “It’s nice.”

“It is,” James agreed, smiling at Regulus.

“Hey,” Peter came bounding down the stairs with dark circles under his eyes. “Are we having a party? I’m trying to sleep but Barty’s room is right next to mine and he is snoring *so* loudly, I swear there’s two people in there.”

Regulus let out a little cough as Remus smiled, “no party Peter. We all just can’t sleep. Nerves.”

Peter nodded sleepily. “Well, I have killer surgical skills so I’m not worried in the slightest. Don’t make me use them though,” Peter cast a stern glance around the kitchen.

“Describing your skills as killer when you could be the person determining if I live or die,” Marlene let out a puff of air, “great word choice Peter.”

“No one is going to die, you stop that,” Dorcas said firmly, a slight frown overcoming her features.

“Not with me around,” Peter puffed out his chest. “I’m great under pressure and my sutures are perfect.”

“Okay, we thought we heard voices,” Lily’s voice sang from the entrance as Mary peered around her shoulder. “I was in Mary’s room because I couldn’t sleep and we heard you down here.”

“It’s getting crowded in here,” Regulus sighed. “I think we should move to the sitting room if we’re all going to stay up. Lily, Mary, can I make you some tea?”

Mary’s eyes looked like they were going to bulge out of her head at Regulus’ niceties. Normally, he would just tell everyone to make it themselves, but tonight he was apparently in a more giving mood.

“Oh no thank you, I can get some water,” Lily smiled.

“I’m good with water too,” Mary nodded as everyone began their slow shuffle to the sitting room.

That’s how James found himself on the couch sitting next to Remus. Regulus was on one end and Sirius was on the other side of Remus at the other end of the couch. Peter was slouched over a large armchair already sleeping soundly without the loud snoring to keep him awake.

Lily and Mary were sprawled out on their backs looking up at the ceiling with the soft rug underneath them. They were both murmuring quietly about their art.

“When you hang the fake Klimt I’ll do the Titian just like the practice,” Mary was saying.

“Can you believe that for a brief moment everyone will be looking at our paintings,” Lily breathed out watching the blades of the ceiling fan swing round and round. “Like in two days, when they flock to the Braxton to see the Renoir’s and the Vermeer’s and the Rossler’s, they’ll be standing in front of all of the paintings and they’ll be admiring the colours and texture and brushstrokes and they’ll be ours. It’ll be our work. Colours we mixed. Brushstrokes we made.”

Mary broke out into a wide grin. “Who would have thought that the majority of the works being showcased at the Braxton museum in New York would be MacDonald and Evans’ originals?”

“We’re awesome,” Lily breathed out excitedly.

“Extremely awesome,” Mary agreed.

They were all talking to each other softly in order to not wake Peter. Regulus had gone from sitting next to James to slightly leaning on him to curling up like a cat in James’ lap with his head resting on his thighs.

Eventually, Lily had fallen asleep on the floor and Mary had gone to retrieve a blanket to cover her up with and a pillow before she went to her own bed to sleep.

Marlene and Dorcas had fallen into their own conversation

“A cruise? We’re cruise people,” Dorcas was laughing quietly on the other couch with Marlene.

“Look, babe, all I’m saying is that in mere hours, both of us will have more money than we’ll know what to do with. So why not be cruise people?”

“So we’ll just cruise around with all our money?”

“Hmm,” Marlene hummed thinking about it. “Sure and travel. We’re young, we’re hot, we’re about to be rich. I want to see all of the world’s pretty things with you and I don’t want to be weighed down with a job.”

Dorcas laughed at that. “Don’t you think you’ll be bored without a job? Like eventually?”

“With you? Not a chance.”

Dorcas leaned in to kiss her.

Remus nudged James, pulling him for his distracted stupor, and James blinked a few times, getting his bearings. He could tell by Regulus’ steady breathing and his recent lack of contributions to the conversation that he had fallen asleep. He looked over at Remus and could see Sirius slouched over on his shoulder, also asleep.

“How do you feel about the heist tomorrow? Everything okay?”

James took a deep breath in. “I think so, yeah. It’s funny, when I first started this entire thing, there was nothing more exciting than the probability of being a part of this. A life changing, Earth-shattering event, even if I was originally just working on the money aspect of it. But now…” James trailed off for a moment.

“But now,” Remus prompted.

James looked down at the boy in his lap. The boy who was currently sleeping peacefully as James carded his fingers absentmindedly through his curls that he loved so much. “He’s my life changing, Earth-shattering event.”

“Oh James,” Remus let out a small laugh. “Who would you be if not the biggest sap in the world?”

“I am the defender of love and lovers everywhere,” James responded sternly, though a smile had already creeped its way onto his face. “Besides, I can’t help it. I literally have a star asleep in my lap. That’s pretty life changing.”

Remus took a look at Sirius who was sleeping soundly on his shoulder and mirrored James’ smile. “Yeah. I suppose you’re right.”

“Wait,” James thought for a minute, his eyebrows furrowing. “If you marry Sirius and I marry Regulus would that make us brother in-laws?” He tried to keep the excitement out of his voice, but failed.

Remus let out another laugh before he furrowed his eyebrows in thought. “No, I don’t think it works like that. I think Regulus and I would be brother in-laws and so would you and Sirius. But we wouldn’t be anything. You know, in relation to one another.”

“No that can’t be right,” James shook his head, suddenly feeling too tired to process through this conundrum.

“No, I think I am right,” Remus countered after a moment of thinking about it.

“I don’t know why I’m even thinking about this. I don’t really think Regulus is the marriage type anyway. Which is fine, as long as I get to have him with me, you know?”

“Hey,” Remus interjected softly. “Anyone would be lucky to marry you, James Potter. Plus, I didn’t really think Regulus was the wear your t-shirt, fall asleep in your lap, dance on countertops, type either and yet, here he is.”

This made James soften instantly and he nudged Remus’ shoulder gratefully. “Are you worried about the heist?”

Remus nodded. “I mean, yeah. A little. I think you would have to be crazy not to be. Or just Barty and Evan I suppose. How they can sleep through the night tonight is absolutely astounding to me,” Remus chuckled. “But I know we can do this. It’s like I’m about to sit down for an exam. I don’t know exactly what will be on it, which is where the nerves stem from, but I’m confident I know the material anyway, you know?”

James nodded. “If you wind up in jail, I’ll bail you out.”

Remus laughed. “Ditto.”

James rested his head on Remus’ shoulder as the sun began to come up.

“I was a fucking barista,” Remus laughed shaking his head. “A barista.”

“Yeah and a damn good one too,” James murmured sleepily.

“I almost bankrupted you.”

“It would’ve been worth it to drink your sweet, sweet, lattes Remus Lupin.”

Remus was quiet for a little while. James thought he had nodded off before he rested his head on top of James’.

“I think we’re going to be friends for the rest of our lives,” he whispered. “Like, you will be the best man at my wedding, be front row at my eventual graduation, help me buy a dog as a milestone to adopting a child, hang out with me in a care home, rest of our lives.”

“Oh absolutely,” James answered. “We’re in this forever. I could never part with you,” he patted Remus’ cheek good naturedly. He glanced over at Dorcas and Marlene and saw that they were both sleeping in what seemed like extremely uncomfortable positions, but they both appeared so serene, James didn’t have the heart to wake them. He also didn’t have the heart to move and risk waking Regulus, so he sat there in comfortable stillness. He sat there as the sun continued to climb steadily in the sky and as Remus nodded off. He sat and kept watch over his friends in that room, over the people that he loved, and leaned into the gentle calm.

James must have nodded off eventually because one minute he was sitting on the couch and the next minute Barty and Evan were storming into the room, their shoes clomping heavily on the floor.

“Wake up everyone, it’s fucking heist day. What the hell are you all doing out here anyway,” Evan’s voice tore through the room.

“Hell of an orgy we missed last night Rosier,” Barty laughed, and Lily, still laying on the floor, stuck out her leg so that he tripped, much to Evan’s delight.

Regulus sat up quickly, his hair almost as wild as James’. “Oh God,” he scrambled up quickly. “Yeah, Evan, thank you for waking me up. Barty, get up off the floor. We have things to do. The rest of you,” his mind seemed to be working at lightning speed, “you all have something to be working on or doing. Go do it. Everyone needs to be down in the kitchen at 10:45 tonight. I’ll see you later,” Regulus turned to James, softening slightly. James nodded and Regulus bounded out of the room, followed quickly by Evan and Barty.

Slowly, everyone began waking up. Lily was complaining of a sore back from sleeping on the hard floor and Sirius was rubbing his neck. Marlene was still asleep and Peter looked completely confused about where he was for a solid thirty seconds before recognition dawned on his face.

James kept himself occupied the entire day, which was much easier then he thought it would be. He finished packing up the last few things in his room. He helped Mary make lunch for everyone, even though Regulus left it up to everyone to make their own individual meals. Mary was certain everyone would forget to eat if that was the case and she didn’t want anyone undernourished before the heist. He met with Sirius in the library as they talked again about their plan for the night.

James learned very quickly that Sirius was doing his due diligence when it came to the heist. He was just as meticulous as Regulus and he wanted everything planned down to the last second. It was almost comforting in a sense, to know that he cared so much about it. He claimed that meticulousness was the best way to avoid casualties, which was Sirius’ ultimate goal. James would always nod along when he said this and then he would immediately try to move past the fact that casualties were even possible during the heist. It wasn’t something he could focus on. Underscoring Sirius’ attention, James could tell that there was a current of excitement there too, an excitement that Sirius was working hard to suppress.

The entire house was alight with nervous excitement. Everyone was running back and forth trying to complete last minute tasks, but no one was alone. Remus helped Peter finish packing, Lily helped Marlene braid her hair and practised soft footsteps with her, Dorcas listened as James attempted to use her as a sounding board for explaining the financial accounts he had created. They all worked together and in small groups even to complete the simplest of tasks. Perhaps it was the nerves of what they were all about to do together that binded them and kept them close to one another, but James also liked to think that it was love too.

Sooner than he thought possible, James was in the kitchen. The sun had set a few hours ago, and he was waiting for everyone to file in so that they could leave and begin the nearly four hour drive to New York. James went over the facts in his head. They would arrive no later than two thirty, and they would be out before four fifteen. If everything went perfectly, they would be up in air before the next sunrise, with millions of dollars of fine art.

Regulus was the first to wander in and James gave him a lopsided grin. He hadn’t seen him all day. No doubt he was busy with his own last minute tasks. Whatever Regulus expected of everyone else, he always expected at least twice as much from himself.

“So when we ride together, I was thinking that–”

“We’re not riding together,” Regulus interrupted him quickly. “You’ll be with Barty, Marlene, Sirius, and Lily. I hope that’s okay.”

“No, that’s fine. I just assumed that–no. Okay,” James shook his head quickly.

“We’ll see each other again on the plane, and I’ll be in your ear the whole time during the heist. Don’t worry about it,” Regulus gave him a tight smile.

Peter came in next, already yawing. “I’m sorry. It’s already past my bedtime, I’m just looking forward to taking a nap in the car on the way over there.”

“I cannot believe you can be tired at a time like this,” Marlene exclaimed as she came into the kitchen followed by Dorcas. “We’re about to make history Petey boy.”

“Please don’t call me that,” Peter cringed.

“James, you are looking so wonderful. Please, please tell the audience who dressed you this evening,” Sirius grinned as he walked in.

“Ah yes,” James smiled back. “Well you see, these black trousers were picked out for me by Sirius Black. And this black shirt was picked out for me by Sirius Black. And these shoes were picked out for me by… Sirius Black. And my socks were picked out for me by Sirius Black,” James took on a dramatic voice.

“And we match,” Sirius exclaimed gleefully. “We are fashion forward. We are the moment. We are a team.”

“Very easy to match when you’re literally wearing all black,” Remus shook his head as he rolled his eyes playfully at James.

“Well I asked you if you wanted to match with us but you said you’d rather die,” Sirius scoffed.

James let out a loud laugh as Lily and Mary came in.

“Barty and Evan are already outside, come on everyone,” Regulus said after he did a brief headcount to make sure that everyone was present.

Once they stepped outside, they were loaded down with things. First the handguns, which still made James nervous to handle. Then toolkits and earpieces, gloves, and torches. Once everything had been distributed, Regulus commanded each of them to their respective vehicles.

There were no pep talks or words of encouragement. There were no parting phrases uttered or hugs given. There were only longing glances and the nervous shuffling of feet as everyone felt what they were too afraid to say out loud. Anything they did felt too similar to saying goodbye.

Barty slid into the driver's seat and Marlene took her place in the passenger's seat. James sat by the window in the back, and Sirius sat next to him. Lily took the other window. James noticed that all the pairs had been split up. Evan and Barty. Him and Regulus. Remus and Sirius. Mary and Lily. Marlene and Dorcas. He wondered if that was intentional, and if so, he wondered why Regulus had wanted it this way.

The drive was long, and the car was silent. Even Marlene for once, seemed to have nothing to say. James was almost certain everyone was running over plans and rules in their heads. Reciting pertinent lessons from previous classes, trying to conjure up images of their class notes in their minds. He listened to Barty tap his fingers absentmindedly on the steering wheel.

Before he knew it, they were coming to a stop. Barty had turned the headlights to the van completely off as he parked the van outside the Braxton museum. The grey brick was barely visible in the limited moonlight.

The air was hot, hotter than it was on the night of the practice run, but it wasn't stale. It was fragrant and teeming with life. Every nerve in James felt like a life wire, crackling and popping and electrifying his bloodstream. This was it, this was the make or break point. He took a deep breath in and felt the way his lungs expanded to their fullest extent. Even though it was dark outside, the colours were brighter, his scent sharper, his eyesight crystal clear.

Everything was eerily quiet. It was the silence that comforted some people, the silence that promised anonymity, but it was also the silence that made James feel as if he were entirely alone.

Both vans were pulled out back by the museum loading dock, out of view from the cameras. The engines were off and while Barty had rolled his windows down, Regulus still had his up. At any second they would wait for the words that would spring them all into action. James began bouncing his leg nervously.

"Docas," Regulus' voice crackled through the earpiece in James' ear. It was a calm, steadying voice, devoid of fear or any emotion, almost robotic-like in quality. James wondered if he would still take that calm tone in a crisis. He had a feeling he would. Panic only begets panic.

James tried again to peer into the other vehicle to see the illumination of Dorcas' computer screens, but it was no use. The windows were too heavily tinted.

"Two guards pacing in galleries three and sixteen. When they hit the blind spots in four and seventeen I can switch the security feed over to the prerecorded tape for guard number three. He appears half asleep already though in the control room. I doubt he'll be going anywhere, anytime soon."

"Barty, Evan go."

As if flipping a switch, Barty was out of the car, closing the door quickly and quietly. Finally, James could see Evan step out of the other van and he was able to catch the smallest glance

of Regulus' curls before Evan shut the door and he and Barty disappeared into the dark night.

James was counting the seconds. Waiting for Regulus' commands. Breathing in the thick silence.

Sirius nudged James' bouncing leg with his own. "You ready for this?"

James nodded. "Are you?"

"Please, I could do this in my sleep." It was a joke, and there was no presumed haughtiness, but Sirius still said it with a straight face.

"Marlene and Remus. Get out by that door now. Enter on my count."

Marlene turned around flashing one last smile at James, Sirius, and Lily from the passenger seat. "Next time you see me, I'll be about eighty-five million dollars richer." All her nerves from the previous night seemed to dissipate as she strode confidently out of the car. Remus had gotten out of the other vehicle and James felt Sirius stiffen beside him.

"He'll be fine," James said, not taking his eyes off Remus' receding figure. "He knows what he's doing. And he's got Marls. They'll be fine."

Sirius didn't answer.

"Three, two, one, now," Regulus said calmly. James wished he was in the other vehicle. He wished he was with Regulus and that he could peer over Dorcas' shoulder and watch everything happen in real time, like he had been able to at the beginning of the practice heist. He imagined Marlene and Remus moving through the museum hallways, desperately trying not to make their footsteps echo on the shiny floors. He imagined them side by side, taking the stairs two at a time as they entered their first gallery, right in between the two security guards' paths.

"Sirius, James, go. And enter when I say."

The loading dock door's lock system and external alarm had been dismantled, thanks to Dorcas. However, if it was left open longer than fifteen seconds, the external museum alarm would be bypassed and the local police would be alerted. This is why it was imperative they entered and exited in precise shifts.

James waved to Lily before he was out and poised by the door. He was hardly aware of Sirius or his movements, entirely preoccupied with ensuring that he was doing everything right. One second he was in the car, and the next he was crouched by the heavy grey door. The same one that Marlene and Remus had just entered. The same one that Lily and Mary would enter right after them.

"Go now," Regulus commanded. "Mary, Lily, start grabbing the canvases and line up by the loading dock."

James had entered first and began winding his way through the museum. The loading dock already opened up into the museum basement. Whilst Marlene and Remus and Lily and Mary had to run up flights of stairs to make it to the ground level, everything that James and Sirius needed was already on the same floor. Since the loading dock was used to bring extra large paintings, sculptures, and new museum acquisitions in, the museum storage facility wasn't far from the entrance. The basement was equally imposing as the rest of the museum, however. It was here that security had their breakroom and their control room. It was here that curators had their offices to plan upcoming exhibitions, and framers had their studio spaces to craft podiums, cases, and frames to display the art. It was here that the conference rooms were located so that museum directors could hold meetings with their deputy directors to discuss financial gains and losses and upcoming exhibitions that would pull in more revenue. It was also the only place in the museum that had minimal security cameras, making Dorcas' visibility difficult.

Sirius was a few paces behind him, owing to the fact that he had to manually close the loading dock door so that it wouldn't slam and alert anyone.

"We're here," James whispered quickly, holding his earpiece to communicate with Regulus.

Regulus didn't respond, instead, there was a series of soft clicking noises and key tones being admitted from the lock pad of the museum security door, letting James know that Dorcas was working on unlocking the door.

"Marlene," Regulus' voice came through again. It was still level and entirely calm, but James could tell that something was off because no further instruction followed.

"I fixed it, it's fine," Marlene breathed out quickly in an almost inaudible whisper.

Oh, how James wished that he could see what was going on upstairs.

The door leading to the museum storage clicked and James pushed it open, Sirius following right behind him.

Immediately, Sirius began to take charge. "James, find me the ladder they keep in here."

James nodded and began looking at the edges of the large imposing room for a propped up ladder somewhere. Here, they could be a little louder. Here, the room was insulated and temperature controlled, making it freezing, but at least they didn't have to operate below a whisper.

The storage room was split into two sections. The front of the room contained rows and rows of large, chain link fences that stood floor to ceiling. They were set along grooves and tracks along the floor and ceiling that allowed the fences to be stretched out across the large expanse of the room to access the myriad of paintings hung against the chain link fence. The back of the storage room housed rows of shelving where small statue works and sculptures sat. Various textile objects were also shelved alongside the sculptural works, but neither Sirius, nor Regulus, seemed all too concerned with taking anything from there.

James found the ladder in the back corner of the room and was carrying it back to Sirius who had already amassed a small collection of three, low hanging paintings, when Regulus' voice came through the earpiece again. "Mary, Lily, go now. Round the stairs to your left."

James looked at the three paintings Sirius had picked. They were all small and stacked up against one another, so he could only see the first one.

"Van Gogh," James breathed out, looking at the tiny painting with thick blue brushstrokes stippled across it.

"Yes, very good," Sirius smiled, distracted by propping up the ladder. "I know it doesn't look like much, or maybe it does, but that little painting there is worth eighty-two million dollars. The Portrait of Dr. Gachet."

"Holy fuck," James breathed out.

"Yeah," Sirius turned to look at him, the excitement evident in his eyes. "I told you I'm good at what I do. I mean would you pick out that painting in this entire room? If it was just you in here? This little thing?"

Honestly, James probably would have. Just because it was a Van Gogh, who had a very distinctive and easily recognisable style. But James knew what Sirius needed to hear at that moment so he shook his head. "No mate, definitely not."

Sirius seemed to be very keen with this answer as he turned back to the wall of paintings.

James sorted the three works by size quickly and then worked on pulling out the next row of paintings, just as he and Sirius had discussed.

"Oh my God," Sirius nearly fell off his ladder when James had pulled out the next row of paintings. Although there were probably eighty works of all different sizes, hung up right next to each other and packed tightly together, James knew immediately which painting had caught Sirius' eye.

In the centre of the rack stood a painting of medium size, but all the other works around it paled in comparison. It was the focal point.

"Gustav fucking Klimt," Sirius shook his head in disbelief.

"We have to take it," James heard himself say. "It's-it's–"

"Yeah, I know," Sirius nodded.

For a minute they both just stared at it. The left side of the canvas housed a skeleton, a skeleton who appeared to be grinning as he emerged from the all-consuming black background. Death. Death was cloaked in crosses of dark purples and blues and blacks and was staring at an amorphous conglomeration of people on the right side of the canvas. This side of the canvas was teeming with colours and life as people clung to one another. Mothers clung to infants, lovers clung to lovers. They were all swaddled in colours and symbols. Life. It was life and death, and death was there, on the left side of the canvas, waiting eagerly to

pluck any one person from the conglomeration of life and claim them as its own. Which one would death pick? Which person on the right side of the canvas was unknowingly experiencing their last day? James tried to see if he could discern who it would be, who death was looking at, but he couldn't tell. It was beautiful, it was haunting, and James couldn't look away.

"We have to take it," James repeated with wide eyes.

"Can't," Sirius responded, breaking out of his momentary awe to return to his job. "It's too famous, James. We'd never be able to sell it."

He frowned. "But what if–"

"Don't even think about taking anything for yourself. You know what Regulus said," Sirius frowned slightly, reading James' mind.

James let out a heavy sight before he pulled away from the painting. "Are these ready to be taken out?" He gestured to the paintings on the floor.

Sirius nodded in the affirmative and James fiddled with his earpiece quickly. "Regulus, I'm ready," James spoke carefully collecting the four small paintings, two under each arm.

James bounced nervously on the balls of his feet waiting for Regulus to give him instructions.

"There should be a clear shot to the doors, James," Regulus said calmly after a few moments. "Go now, listen for footsteps."

James swallowed thickly, taking a last look at Sirius. His dark hair was pulled back to keep it out of his face as he worked diligently and quietly. He didn't even bother to look back at James as he grappled with a larger painting. Without a single word James pushed himself through the heavy metal doors.

It was warmer outside the non-temperature controlled room and James took a quick and careful look around. Tall cement walls and dim fluorescent lights guided his path. He listened quickly for footsteps before he began walking carefully back to the loading dock doors. If things worked out the way Regulus wanted them too, the way Sirius and James planned them too, then James would be making this walk three more times. Once more by himself and twice with Sirius.

Regulus was the one who imposed a four trip limit. Sirius had argued for six, but the more times they moved across the floor, out in the open, the greater risk they would incur. James was inclined to agree with Regulus.

Every muscle in James' body was tense as he crossed the museum floor silently. His footsteps made no noise on the concrete floors and he was hyper aware of his hands, where they were, if they moved. He felt his fingers wrap around the gilded frames through the gloves. He felt the indents and grooves of the wood against his sides. He took in quick and shallow breaths, ensuring that there would be no noise. He hardly dared to blink. Vaguely, he

was aware that Regulus was issuing instructions to Mary and Lily but since he knew they didn't pertain to him, he focused all of his attention on listening to his immediate surroundings. If Regulus needed him, he would call his name.

He was focused on so many things at once, making sure that he was doing everything just right, that time passed by with such rapid ease, James found himself pushing out of the loading doors in what felt like five seconds, when he knew the journey had taken him several minutes.

The warm summer air hit his face and James felt momentary relief wash over him. If they got nothing else, at least they had this. Both vans were still side by side with the engines and lights off. Because they were both black, they blended almost seamlessly into the background of the dark night. James made his way to the back of the empty van which was opened. He figured Regulus must've had Peter run out and open them. Or maybe Lily did before she went in. As quickly as he could, he placed the paintings in the back of the van, making sure to treat each one with delicate care. There would be no loosened paint flakes on his watch. He exited the back of the van and smiled to himself, admiring his work. Twenty-five percent done.

Under Regulus' instruction, James was able to make it back into the storage room with ease. Sirius already had another stack started.

"You are working faster than me, cut that out," James called playfully once he shut the door behind him.

"I don't want to alarm you or anything, but we are going to make so much fucking money," Sirius smiled at him. "Like even more than the practice heist."

There was a wild and erratic look in his eyes. It wasn't one that was necessarily crazed, but more of a look of inevitability. Like this is always where Sirius was meant to be; this is always what he was meant to be doing. It was evident that he enjoyed it. It was clear that he was letting himself get swept up in the heist, and James would be damned if he did anything to break that trance. That trance kept him safe. James let his eyes dart to the gun holstered to the side of Sirius' hip for a nanosecond while his back was turned.

"So, did you see my brother out there? What did he say?"

James blinked and focused his attention back on the paintings.

"No, I didn't see him. He was in the other van with the windows rolled up. I tried to wave before I ran back in here, but I didn't–" James frowned. "I didn't see him. I haven't seen him at all today. I figured we would at least ride over here together, but he didn't want to do that."

"Hmm. That's Regulus for you. He gets weird about these things, don't take it personally."

"What things," James asked, arranging the next pile of paintings by size.

"Things he loves," Sirius answered simply as if the answer were glaringly obvious. Maybe he was making a reference to the heist, but James was fairly certain Sirius was also talking about

him.

Maybe it was glaringly obvious. James knew that Regulus loved him, he never let himself forget it. It wasn't even something he was consciously aware of, really. He knew he loved Regulus and Regulus loved him just as he knew he had to breathe, just as he knew he had to blink, just as his heart knew how to beat. It was just something he felt, and maybe everyone else could feel it too, even with Regulus being as cautious as he was. James felt a warmth spread through his chest.

Two of the paintings Sirius had pulled would be too large for James to carry by himself. He separated those out and waited for Sirius to pick a few smaller ones that James could grab and take with him on his second trip. He stood back, out of Sirius' way and watched him for a moment. He was moving through the rows of paintings with impressive speed, pulling them out and analysing each work. Sirius called it his artistic eye. It allowed him to take in numerous works and mentally calculate the best one based on artist, aesthetic, price point, rarity, and recognizability. He claimed he had honed his artistic eye since he was a small child, which is why he was allowed to pick all of the paintings in storage, and James was in charge of the manual labour aspects like moving the ladder, pulling out large shelves of heavy paintings, and handling particularly encumbersome frames.

Eventually, Sirius had added two more works to the pile with an unenthused derisive snort. "The Van Gogh is the best they've got. I'm afraid we've started with the best one, and I got my hopes up."

James didn't respond, he just loaded up the paintings under his arms once more and headed to the door. The second trip James took to the van passed in a nearly identical fashion to the first one. He let Regulus' words guide him through the hallways when he needed them too and he was sure not to make a single noise, letting the loading dock door close slowly and quietly with his foot.

Fifty percent done , he thought to himself as he dusted off his hands. It was more of a symbolic gesture considering his hands weren't in the slightest dirty, and he was still wearing gloves to avoid unwanted fingerprints.

He made his way back inside to Sirius. He was thankful that whatever guard was on the floor with him, sitting in the control room and watching the fake security footage Dorcas had doctored, wasn't particularly antsy or inclined to walk around and leave his seat. Regulus was right. Years of unexciting and monotonous nights had inevitably led to his complacent and inattentive nature. James was even more thankful that he no longer had to walk the floor by himself. The next two trips would be conducted in tandem with Sirius which meant a few things. One, it meant that he had a partner with him. Marlene had Remus. Lily had Mary. Everyone who went into the museum had another partner with them at all times, and while James had Sirius in a sense, he still had to spend the first half of his job alone. Now he didn't, which was comforting, even if James still had lingering wariness about Sirius Black and his allegiance. Two, it meant that James had successfully completed his job without any mistakes. If he messed anything up from this point forward, it would be the joint effort of both Sirius and himself. The blame wouldn't fall solely on him, which was another small relief. Three, it meant the chances of messing up had astronomically declined. Sirius was

skilled, he knew what he was doing and he had been put in all kinds of high pressure situations. This wasn't his first time doing this, which meant that he could improvise if he needed too.

"Everytime you come back in here I feel so very relieved," Sirius let out a little sigh as James pushed his glasses back up on the bridge of his nose.

"That makes two of us," James let out a little laugh and Sirius did too before they fell silent.

James knew at that moment that they were both also thinking the same thing. There was very limited radio chatter from Regulus coming through the ear pieces, which meant that everything was running smoothly upstairs. Up there, possibly right above their heads, Marlene and Remus were removing paintings from the wall with ease that only months of practice could allow as Mary and Lily went through and replaced all of the stolen works with their own. The fact that Regulus wasn't saying anything meant that they were safe from the two guards circling them. It meant they were doing everything perfectly. It meant that they were pulling this off.

"Well, would you look at that," Sirius prompted James' attention to a painting on one of the rows he had just pulled out.

James studied the painting carefully. The bottom half of the canvas contained a winding road leading to blue mountains on the horizon. Green trees lined either side of the path. Then, the focal point was two men standing side by side with their backs facing the viewer. They seemed to be in conversation, though neither of them were walking along the winding path. Instead, they were floating in the middle of the canvas, drifting up towards the clouds in the sky, unfettered by gravity.

"Woah, weird," James breathed out.

"It's a Magritte. It's called 'The Art of Conversation'," Sirius began. "You know when you're talking with someone and it's so good that every little thing they say has you begging for more? Like time doesn't exist and hours go by in seconds and you feel so light and happy just being there with them and being able to hear the sound of their voice? You feel like you're walking on air."

James looked at the two floating men on the canvas.

"That's how I feel with Remus, you know. Everything he says makes me lighter than air, I would float away if gravity didn't keep me tethered down," Sirius seemed lost in the painting for a moment. "I kissed him in front of a Magritte painting. It's how we met. Or maybe he kissed me. Or we both kissed each other at the right time because it was perfect and right."

"He kissed you," James said, smiling at the newfound fondness in Sirius' voice. "You just talked about snogging him but he was the one who actually did it."

"Oh my God so he told you the entire ordeal," Sirius looked away from the painting to make wide eyes at James.

“Yeah, as soon as he got home,” James laughed. “He tells me everything. I’ll be sure to tell him how perfect and right you thought it was though,” James added for good measure.

“I would appreciate it if you let me tell him myself,” Sirius countered quickly before returning to the painting. “I think Remus would like this. He would like it a lot, don't you think? It would look good in his new flat or something. Our new flat.”

James shook his head even though Sirius was no longer looking at him. “Now I think it’s my turn to remind you that we can’t take paintings based on emotional attachment, unless you want to go back and grab that Klimt for me. And then Regulus can yell at the both of us.”

Sirius actually seemed to consider this proposition for a moment before he sighed and shook his head quickly, trying to clear it from the tempting thoughts. “No, you’re right. Moving on,” Sirius began examining the other works that were hanging around it.

“Regulus,” Remus’ voice came through on the ear piece. “Marlene and I are ready to make the first trip down there.”

Remus and Marlene needed to make two trips to the van in order to grab all the paintings. Even then, Mary and Lily would also be in charge of taking the paintings that Remus and Marlene had left behind. So overall, it would take three trips between the four of them.

This part was more precarious. They had to carry the paintings down stairs, through galleries where guards walked on their nightly patrol, through rooms with silent alarms and all without a single noise.

Sirius stilled slightly at the sound of Remus’ voice, and James’ heartbeat picked up. Regulus began instructing them in a calm tone through the gallery spaces and James listened carefully as he watched Sirius pull the last few paintings. He wasn’t aware just how nervous he was until he heard Marlene’s voice confirm that they had made it back up the stairs to the gallery again. He let out a deep breath and felt his nerves calm down slightly.

Sirius and James had sorted out the remaining works into two piles to be transported, one for each trip. No sooner had Marlene announced her arrival did Sirius announce that he and James were ready to make the third trip. It was a carefully timed operation, with everyone working in precise movements. A chain reaction of sorts.

Upon Regulus’ instruction, Sirius was pushing through the doors, and James found himself ensuring the storage room door shut quietly behind him for the third time that night as Sirius took the lead through the hallways.

The paintings were much heavier this time around, their frames were weighing James down and digging into his arms uncomfortably. One of them was a rather dramatic, Renaissance looking work. James made a mental note to ask Regulus about it later.

Moving through the museum with Sirius was easier, James was sure of it. He tried to stay just as alert and focused as he was when he was by himself, but he couldn’t help the feeling of relief that was also washing over him. Two was definitely better than one.

They placed the paintings in the back of the empty van carefully. Making sure to leave as much room as possible. Though the back of the van was spacious, They still had another trip to make, and they might need extra storage space for Mary and Lily to leave the last few paintings if Marlene and Remus had filled the other van. You could never be too careful.

Seventy-five percent done.

James and Sirius began their quick walk back to the entrance. Sirius tried to stare in through the tinted windows of the other van containing Regulus, Dorcas, and Peter, and once he realised he couldn't see in at all he threw up the middle finger whilst sticking out his tongue at the driver's seat of the car where Regulus was presumably sitting.

James quickly pulled his arm down casting an apologetic smile at Regulus before they continued on their way.

"Look, he may be your boyfriend, but he's my brother. He deserved that," Sirius smiled as Regulus instructed them to go inside at the same time he instructed Marlene and Remus to make their second, and last trip down.

Once they were back in the storage room, James and Sirius immediately got to work pushing all the pulled out stacks back against the walls. They had to make this room appear as if no one had been in there, as if no one had touched anything.

"How long do you think it'll take them to realise everything is missing," James asked, grunting with the effort it took to push in a stack.

"Depends," Sirius replied. "Down here, half the works aren't even catalogued so as long as the holes aren't obvious and they weren't planning on using these paintings in any immediate shows, then we could stay hidden for up to a week. It'll be these thefts down here that will tip them off about the thefts of the museum's permanent collection on display to the public. They'll have to meticulously check every work. It'll take months for them to be able to fully assess the damage. But I think taking the Van Gogh was risky. Someone could come down here to check tomorrow and see it's missing. It's a good piece, one that everyone would know is missing. But we should be flying over the ocean by then anyway so I'm not too concerned."

James nodded, taking a look around with his hands on his hips. He knew from Regulus' lessons that no one was in charge of checking museum storage on a daily basis. If a curator requested a specific work be pulled for exhibition mockups, or a museum requested a work for loan, then they would go through storage. Otherwise they hardly ever audited storage or updated the logs.

"Mary, Lily, the last paintings are outside gallery three grab them. I'll navigate you out."

James let out another sigh of relief at Regulus' voice. That meant that Remus and Marlene had made it out of the museum undetected and without problem. They were sitting in the car, waiting on the rest of them now. Sirius let out a little jump of excitement. Two out. Four to go.

When all the shelves were pushed in, James returned the ladder to the exact spot it was before he moved it and propped it up against the wall again. Both he and Sirius swept their gazes around the room. It looked pristine and untouched.

Carefully, they picked up the final paintings. They both took a few seconds to check the floor for paint flakes, shoe scuffs, loose nails, anything, but it was entirely clean. They made their way to the door and waited with baited breath for Regulus to give them the signal.

“James. Sirius. It’s all you.”

Sirius pushed through the doors for the final time. Mary and Lily had done their part perfectly. The decoy paintings were hung. The guards could circle the top floors at their fancy and would find nothing out of the ordinary. Nothing would be out of place. Four out. Two to go.

James followed Sirius silently as he led them through the floor. Past the conference rooms and the filing cabinets containing financial statements. Past hallways that led to empty curatorial spaces, and director’s offices. He was following Sirius almost mindlessly when he came to an abrupt stop. Sirius looked back and cast him a glance, one that said ‘ *shut up* ’ a moment before James heard the echo of the first footstep. And James did shut up, even though he was already making no noise. He stopped breathing entirely just to be sure. The footstep wasn’t close, but the echo in the vast space was making it difficult to discern where exactly it was coming from. He could see the grey loading dock door. They were so close. Maybe they could just make a run for it.

“Sirius.” Regulus’ voice was still deadly calm. Sirius was already moving again, with the same rapid urgency as before, except this time he was leading James back into a shadowy hallway, one that was barely illuminated. Not towards the door. “The third guard is up. Most likely moving to use the bathroom. I can’t see you. You’re in a blindspot. Stay hidden.”

Sirius had pressed himself as flat as possible against the wall. James followed suit. He felt the cold tinge of fear begin to creep it’s way up his spine. He knew from the floorplan that the bathroom on this floor was the next hallway over. He hoped that they were far back enough in the adjacent hallway to not be seen. He hoped the guard wouldn’t get confused and turn down the wrong hallway by accident. He hoped. He hoped. He hoped. Because if the guard did any of those things, or a number of other ones, James had no idea what he would do. He felt the weight of the hand gun attached to his side nearly pull him down to the ground.

“He’s definitely headed to the bathroom. Barty,” Regulus came through again. It was nice to hear his voice. Even if it was like this. The echoing footsteps grew louder and louder.

“I’m ready. Say the word and I’ll be in those doors,” Barty’s voice came through. It was calm, just like Regulus’, but hardened. Rougher somehow too. James would even dare to say that he sounded a little excited at the prospect of having to storm the museum floor.

James wouldn’t want that. There were contingency plans of course. What to do if they needed to storm the museum, but that made things exponentially more difficult. It upped the nature of their crimes, it made them murderers, it took away their anonymity that was crucial for escaping the country. It made them murderers.

Then, when the footsteps sounded so incredibly close that James was sure his heart would explode out of his chest, they began to recede again. He hadn't even seen the guard pass him. Then, a few seconds later, the sound of a door closing echoed from the next hallway over, and James let out a silent breath.

"Sirius. James. Run."

They didn't need to be told twice. They crossed the room in long strides, making minimal noise, and James tried his best to close the loading dock door as quietly as possibly, but Sirius was already moving. Thankfully, Barty was still waiting right outside and was able to ensure it closed properly before he followed closely behind them.

Both cars had already been started, their engines idling as James and Sirius put the remaining paintings in the back of the van. They didn't have time to process anything before they were in their seats. Barty pulled out of the museum faster than James had time to close the van door or put on his seatbelt. He was thrown back against the seat due to the rapid acceleration of Barty's driving as he grappled with the seatbelt.

Marlene turned back to them and even though her eyes were wide with slight fear, she was grinning at them. "You two gave us a bit of a scare in there."

"Sorry," Sirius grinned. "It wouldn't be a heist if something unplanned didn't happen. Where's Lily?"

James took a look around. Lily wasn't with them.

"Jumped in the other van. She's fine," Marlene answered quickly. "We didn't even know what was happening, I just see Barty and Evan over here with their guns drawn and perched at the door like they're the fucking S.W.A.T. team or something, ready to go in and rescue you both."

"James and I didn't need saving, thank you very much, we're the kind of people who know how to save ourselves. It's why we get along so well," Sirius countered smugly.

James was looking out the window at the blur of scenery passing them. They had done it. They had done it and no one was any wiser, but his heart was still hammering in his chest. The adrenaline was coursing through his veins, like the worst wasn't over. He couldn't relax until he saw Regulus. Until they were on the plane, high in the air. Then, maybe his heart would steady.

"I could kiss the both of you," Marlene sang. "The whole lot of you really. We're amazing. We're so phenomenal. Just look at all that art we have in the back," she jabbed a finger towards the back of the van. "In two days I know I'll be glued to the news. Waiting to see when they'll find out and what they'll say about us. We're so bloody rich."

James was still staring out the window of the car, watching Regulus' van in front of them. Barty wasn't saying much either as he drove them down side roads and hidden paths to a private airport. James wasn't entirely sure where it was, or how long it would take them to reach their destination.

“James, you alright there,” Sirius asked, pulling him from his thoughts.

“Yeah, sorry,” James felt his eyebrows furrow. He wasn’t riding the thrill of excitement and adrenaline that Marlene seemed to be, and he wasn’t entirely placid and calm like Barty and Sirius either. He was still feeling wary, still cautious. “I just can’t shake the feeling that something–”

“That something bad is still going to happen,” Sirius finished for him. “I know what that’s like. I’ve been there before. It’s just nerves, you’ll calm down after a while.”

“Sirius, this is the love of your life speaking to you from the other vehicle. Please tell me you’re okay,” Remus’ voice came through the earpiece that all of them were still wearing.

Sirius grinned like mad before he responded. “Remus Lupin, love of my entire life, I have never been better.”

James smiled at hearing Remus’ voice. “I’m fine too, Remus. You know, the other love of your life? Thanks for asking,” James said into the earpiece.

“This is not a private phone conversation assholes,” Evan’s voice came through. “Stop talking.”

“Rosier,” Barty sang, one hand on the steering wheel and the other on the ear piece. “I miss you.” He drug out the last syllable for a second.

“Yeah, yeah,” Evan’s voice came through after a few beats of silence, a great deal softer than it had been before.

“You just saw each other,” Marlene laughed.

Barty shrugged, “what can I say? I have separation anxiety.”

They drove in silence for a while more. James began tapping his leg nervously. The strange sense of foreboding wouldn’t leave him, and it was vindicated when a large vehicle pulled around the corner, seemingly out of the dark, and began tailing them closely.

Barty seemed to notice at the same time as James. “Regulus,” he said through the earpiece warningly.

At the same time, the car behind them turned on their high beams and flooded the entire vehicle with blinding light. And then the sirens started. Flashing blue and red lights. James felt the arid sting of acute panic rise in the back of his throat.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck. Shit, shit. Fuck,” Barty released a string of curses under his breath.

“Barty,” Regulus said calmly. “This was always a possibility. You know what to do. Take the alternate route. Do not fucking go to the airport until you are sure you’ve lost them.”

“There’s more,” Marlene called out. She had turned around in her seat and was looking out the back of the van. Two more cars had begun tailing them.

James had no idea what to do. He was momentarily pressed back into his seat as Barty accelerated quickly and swerved around Regulus' vehicle, turning sharply down a left hand street.

"Oh fuck. Oh fuck. We're in a car chase. We're in a car chase? A police chase," Marlene had switched fully over to panic now. "It doesn't make sense. How do they know? The guards didn't see us. We didn't trip any wires. Why are they here? I don't understand. It doesn't make sense."

James turned his head to Sirius.

"James," he said, barely above a whisper.

"I'm only going to ask this once," James said levelly. He was surprised at how calm his voice was, despite the loud sirens and the impending sense of doom that had descended upon them. "Was this you?"

Sirius shook his head silently. He looked ill and beads of sweat began lining his forehead. "No. No, but Frank and Pandora are very good at their jobs," he croaked. "Maybe they did something. Found something out. I don't know."

Two of the cars had followed Barty and the other one had followed Regulus' vehicle down the other road.

"McKinnon. Gun. Get your gun. Point, aim, don't shoot unless I say," Barty said tightly.

"No. Don't you dare fucking shoot them," Sirius snapped his attention back to Barty. "Frank is probably with them."

"Those aren't INTERPOL vans, fucker. Those are good old fashioned American police officers," Barty gritted out.

"I'm not shooting anyone unless Regulus himself gives me the fucking orders," Marlene called. But the fact that she had her gun drawn and aimed wasn't very convincing. She had taken off her seatbelt and was crouched in the passenger seat on her knees, staring out the back of the van.

Barty took another sharp turn and James was sure that they were on two wheels for a brief moment. The canvases in the back banged up against one another sharply. James was sure that whoever was behind them could see directly into the car. They could see the canvas and the position everyone was sitting in. They could see everything.

The trees outside the window no longer had a shape, they were moving so fast that they were dark green, almost black streaks. The asphalt grey road was nothing but a streak of colour as well and James was struck with the odd thought that he was in the middle of a large abstract painting of sorts. A Rothko painting. He was inside of some giant elaborate Rothko painting where nothing could touch him. Everything was just colour and paint and light.

“Pull over,” a man’s voice came through. It was amplified and stern and commanding. It seemed to surround all sides of the vehicle and Barty let out a loud, maniacal laugh.

James knew what was going to happen. He had sat through enough classes with Regulus to know what happened in the event of a police chase. They would want them to pull over. They would warn them of consequences that would happen if they didn’t comply. If they were lucky, they would try and use tire spikes to stop the van. If they weren’t lucky, the police would open fire. If they weren’t able to shake them in fifteen minutes, then the police could call for backup. And then they would be even more fucked than they were now.

He remembered that day in class, so vividly. Lily was raging about how barbaric it was that the police could just open fire on suspects, before they were proven guilty. Before they could prove that a crime had even happened. Regulus had spent a lot of the time reviewing Supreme Court cases that established the legality of this. There was minimal legal liability at best for police in the United States. James remembered how he and Marlene also insisted that America was a lawless land. That day spurred a lot of outrage, a lot of strong feelings, even some jokes, but not a lot of worry. They should have worried about it more. They really should have worried about it more.

“James Potter are you in there? We know you were at the auction. We know who you're working with.”

James felt his heart plummet in his chest. It was a woman’s voice this time. It was calm and had a high, dreamy quality to it.

“Pandora,” Sirius croaked, scrambling so that he was completely turned backwards in his seat. "I didn't do this," Sirius' voice took on a high pitched almost wailing quality. "I wouldn't do this to Remus. Tell Regulus. Tell him I didn't do this. Don't let him do anything to Remus. I swear. I swear I didn't do this."

"Sirius shut the fuck up and pull yourself together," Barty yelled sharply. "Now is not the time. Regulus won't do anything until we're fucking out of here so shut up!"

James hadn’t moved. He was still sitting face forward, looking out the window. But he was no longer thinking about Rothko.

“Holy fucking hell,” Marlene breathed out. “She knows his name. She knows about James. Should I–should I shoot her?”

“Easy McKinnon. No you shouldn’t,” Barty said warningly. “I’m getting us out of this.”

There was nothing from Regulus. James would really like to hear from Regulus. *We have people looking for you as we speak.* Well, they found him.

“See James,” the girl, Pandora continued. “I was able to find out a few things about you. It was difficult, but I got there eventually. You used to work for a big hot shot bank. Had a fancy corporate job, made a lot of money, on track to be promoted. But then you quit. Why did you quit James?”

“Don’t listen to her, James. You hear me? Don’t fucking listen to her,” Barty turned on the radio. It was loud and blaring. Classical. Regulus liked classical music.

“Got bored doing the same thing every day? Figured you’d dip your toe into the world of crime? How did a good person like you get mixed up in all of this?”

Barty made a wide swinging turn in an attempt to shake them, but they were still close behind. He had managed to place a little bit of distance between them though.

“Why is she singling him out?” Marlene’s voice was high with panic.

“They don’t know a lot,” Sirius responded. His voice was wavering. He didn’t tear his eyes away from the police car that was following behind them. “They’re using what they have.”

James was still deadly silent.

“See we had a little chat with your mum, Euphemia? Filled her in on what you’ve been up too. And she thinks that you got confused. Maybe you’re in too deep over your head. Maybe you got mixed up with the wrong people. But she doesn’t think this is you.”

“Okay, okay. What the fuck,” Marlene screeched above the music. “How do they know he’s in here? James? Are you okay? James?”

“They can see in the vehicle McKinnon,” Sirius said flatly. “They know what he looks like.”

“They can’t see that well,” Barty shot back.

James wasn’t okay. The music was loud, but it wasn’t drowning out anything. He couldn’t really breathe. Or think. He was having a semi-out of body experience. He needed to talk to his mum. He needed to tell her how sorry he was. He needed to tell her that he fell in love. He fell so madly, deeply in love. He needed her to understand. He needed his mum. The violin rang in his ears.

“James, I need you to convince your friends over here to pull the vehicle over so we can search it. You do that for us as we can let you see your mum. You can tell her you made a mistake. You do that for us and we’ll help you out. Do you think you can do that for us? James?”

Barty was putting more distance between them. It looked promising. It looked like they might be gaining the upper hand. James rolled down the window and the warm air came rushing into the vehicle. It hit his face and blew his hair back wildly.

“James what the fuck are you doing? Roll that window up now,” Barty yelled.

Quickly, James leaned out the side of the car. Half of his chest was out of the vehicle, and he let the window ledge stabilise him. Then, he threw up. He emptied the contents of his stomach that felt like they had curdled due to the nerves and the anxiety. He retched until there was nothing left and then he cleaned himself up as best he could, and rolled the window backup wordlessly.

“Okay. Okay, I think I should start shooting now. Just to get her to stop. James is freaking me out.” Marlene eyed him again.

James just blinked mutely in response.

“Sirius,” Pandora’s voice rang out again. “We’re here to help.”

Sirius covered his ears with his hands tightly and screwed his eyes shut

“Regulus,” Barty said into the earpiece. “Regulus it’s James. He’s freaking out on me. They have some cop bitch talking about his mum and shit. He hasn’t said a word in a long while and he just puked his brains out. Tell me what to do here.”

There was more space between the vehicles now. Pandora seemed to fall quiet for a moment. James went back to pretending he was in a Rothko painting. He felt slightly better after throwing up. He felt slightly better pretending he was in a two-dimensional world of streaks of colour.

“James,” Regulus’ voice came through the earpiece, clear and strong. “James you’re going to be fine. Stick to the plan, take some deep breaths. I’m going to see you on the plane and everything is going to be fine.”

James focused on Regulus’ voice. Pandora was speaking again, but it finally faded into the background. He could hear Regulus. That was enough.

“Barty, we managed to lose the police that were trailing us. We’re headed to the destination. We’re about twenty minutes out.” That was Dorcas. That was good. At least they were safe.

“We’re putting distance between us and them,” Barty responded quickly. “It’s good. I think I can lose them up here in a minute.”

“James. Could you say something please.” Regulus’ voice was still calm. “Give me a sign of life.”

James blinked rapidly. Regulus needed him to speak. He could speak for Regulus.

“Do you like Rothko, Reg,” he whispered, his voice hoarse.

“Rothko? Yeah I do. His colour field paintings contain so much emotion in them. You wouldn’t think that blocks of colour could do that, but some people stand in front of them and they’re moved to tears. They’re a force to witness in person.”

James nodded even though Regulus couldn’t see him. He nodded as he looked out the window, at the sky and grass and road blending into long streaks of colour. “Yeah. I didn’t understand Rothko before, but now, I think I kind of do.”

And then, someone from the car behind them opened fire.

James remembered something that Barty had told him once. He said that if you could hear the sound of a gun firing, it meant that the bullet hadn’t killed you. There was that at least.

“Regulus, they’re fucking shooting,” Barty’s voice was strained again.

“They’re getting nervous, Barty. They’re worried that they’re losing you and they’re trying to shoot out one of your tires. They know they’ve lost us. You’re their last shot. They’re just desperate. That’s all.”

How was he still so calm? James was sure it was an illusion now. One that Regulus was nearly perfect at upholding. *Brave,* James thought.

“Oh that’s all? Wonderful. Thank you so much.”

James looked at Sirius who had ducked down behind his seat. The sound of bullets hitting metal and ricocheting off things rang in his ears. Marlene was ducking too, apparently giving up on the idea of firing back. *That’s good* , James thought. At least none of them would be murderers. At least this time it would be the supposed “good guys” who did all the killing.

“Please don’t shoot Pandora,” Sirius was whispering over and over again. “Don’t shoot her. I know this wasn’t her idea. It’s the police she’s with. It’s them. She would never condone opening fire like this. Don’t let her get hurt.”

“They have shit fucking aim,” Barty spat. “If they were smart, they’d aim for my head.”

Everything was happening so quickly and yet for some reason, James felt that everything had slowed down immensely. He felt like there was an incredible amount of space to move between the seconds. It was odd that it took the bullets raining down around him to bring him out of his temporary shock. He could think a little bit better now and he began laughing at the absurdity of it all. Cello. Cello, piano and moody classical music was still flooding through the van’s speakers. Barty hadn’t turned the radio down.

“Hey Regulus,” James said into his earpiece quickly. It was a moment of clarity. Afterall, he could die. It actually felt like he might die, before he got the chance to get a lawyer or go to court. Or to see Regulus again. Or to call his mum. Or to laugh with Remus. Or to see the sunrise again. “I love you. That’s all.”

“James Potter. Shut the fuck up,” Regulus said quickly. He could hear the slight crack in Regulus’ voice. It was a slight break in his calm façade.

James only ducked when the glass from his window shattered from a stray bullet. They did have shit aim.

He wasn’t sure how long he was crouched down there while Barty drove. He couldn’t look out the window, but he could feel the crazy manoeuvres that Barty was doing. He felt useless just sitting there, thanking God that he was alive with every bullet fired. He wanted to do something, anything. But the only thing he would be able to do was draw his gun and fire at the police. Which he didn’t want to do. Everytime a bullet would go off Marlene would repeat her mantras.

“I’m fine. It’s fine. I’m fine. It’s fine.”

Somehow though, by a miracle, Barty had managed to put enough distance between himself and the police that the firing stopped. And then a few minutes later he made a sharp turn, and then another, and then the lights that had been beaming through the back of the van faded and disappeared. The sirens became more and more distant. There were no longer flashing red and blue lights flickering ominously behind them. They had lost them.

“Regulus,” Barty said after everything went eerily calm. Marlene returned to sitting in her seat normally, and buckled back up. She turned the music off with a shaky hand. “We lost them. We’re ten minutes out. Everyone is fine. The car is fucked though.”

“Just get your ass over here,” Regulus breathed out.

James thought back to the lesson in class. Mary had been the one to bring it up. In the event of a chase, wouldn’t the surrounding airports be the most obvious locations? Wouldn’t the police already have other men, backup, staking out the airports? Or at the very least, if they were able to shake the police in a car chase, would the airport be the first palace they drove too? Airports and train stations and bus stops. Any place that allowed for widespread travel.

James hadn’t even thought to consider that. Nearly every day he was reminded that he was surrounded by a team of complete geniuses. People who could see things that he couldn't.

Regulus had explained that there was a difference between public and private airports. That the public airports would most definitely be monitored, and some of the more well known private ones as well. But rich people always found a way to circumvent the law. They had hidden airports built for hidden purposes. They paid enough money to the right people so that the right people would turn a blind eye. They flew aeroplanes meant for international travel out of places that only allowed for domestic flights, without consequence. This of course, was all for Regulus to worry about. He would ensure that the airport they went to would be small, and unknown to the police. That was his job. Their job was to ensure that they didn’t lead the police right to the said airport in a high speed car chase.

James’ attention moved from these thoughts to Sirius who was moving tentatively to the back of the van where the paintings were. He began going through each of them carefully, assessing the damage. Checking the front and back and the frames. Looking at the canvas with delicate care.

Eventually, James got up from the car floor and took his seat again. He was aware that he was shaking slightly and there was a ringing in his ears that was almost unbearable. He needed to take a nap. A shower, to wash everything that happened off of him, and a nap to just stop everything for a little while.

“There’s a few frames here that got hit, but the canvases look fine to me. Nothing Lily and Mary won’t be able to repair in a few minutes,” Sirius said decisively. “Nothing fatal.”

James wondered why none of them were screaming. Now felt like a very good time to scream since the immediate danger was over and they could all think about what they had just gone through. But James wasn’t exactly screaming either. Screaming wouldn’t really help matters, he supposed. He wasn’t crying either, which was nice. At least he was able to maintain some

semblance of dignity after the previous events. He began shaking the shards of glass from his hair.

“Holy shit. Holy fucking shit that was awesome,” Marlene laughed. It was a crazed laugh of disbelief and relief and sheer adrenaline. “When I’m old and grey, and my children have children, I’m going to sit them all down and tell them this story about how I was fucking insane and fearless and they’re not going to believe me. And Dorcas will have to back me up. They’re not going to fucking believe me. I mean, who would?” She turned around to look at James. She was about to say something else when her wild smile dropped and her eyes went wide.

James looked out the front window past her, and could see that they were close to the tarmac. Faintly, he could see the other black van, illuminated by the lights of the runway in the distance. Thank fucking God. The sun would be up any minute.

“James,” Marlene said lowly, looking at his arm. “Are you alright? You’re bleeding.”

James followed her gaze to where she was looking and touched his hand lightly on his other arm. “Oh,” he said a bit dazed. His fingers came into contact with the wet fabric of his shirt. His voice didn’t sound like his own. “Yeah. I think I was shot.”

“What,” Sirius barked out, grabbing James’ arm to inspect it. “You probably should’ve fucking led with that, mate.” There was a slight tear in James' shirt where the bullet made contact and Sirius clicked his tongue. “Doesn’t look too bad. I think it just grazed you.”

“Peter will fix you up on the plane. Everyone out,” Barty cut in as he brought the van to a screeching halt beside the other one. "Don't get blood inside the car."

The plane had the steps pulled out, leading up to the door. Eight tan steps. Ahead, he could see Remus and Evan carrying the last few paintings up the stairs. James kept his hand on his wounded arm, even though it didn’t really hurt. He let a crazed laugh burble out of him. What a fucking day this night has been.

Chapter End Notes

I know you probably have a lot of questions! Some/most of which will hopefully be cleared up next chapter :) Also,,, how are we feeling? There was no MCD during the heist, which I know a lot of you thought there would be and I really hope you all aren't too terribly disappointed. I was a little nervous ngl when I read all your theories for heist night and they all involved the MCD hahaha.

Anyway, thank you for reading!! I hope you all are having the loveliest of days!! <33

Chapter 29: Phase Two

Chapter Summary

> Keep your friends close and your enemies closer. aka James goes through every emotion under the sun.

Chapter Notes

> tw: brief discussions of violence, some blood, references to gun violence (pls lmk if I missed anything!)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Don’t even think about touching that, just get on the plane,” Barty said quickly as James opened up the back of the van. Sirius and Marlene got to work freeing the paintings from the secure ties James had just worked to knot. “I know it’s your job but I’ll do it and Evan will help me. You need to get on the plane and find Peter for your arm,” Barty continued, correctly interpreting the look on James’ face.

James nodded, still staring at the paintings in the back. All around him, people were rushing. The other van was empty. Everyone from that car was waiting on the plane except for Evan who was bounding down the steps and heading right for them.

“I’m not kidding James. Regulus is already going to freak out about your arm the last thing we need is to add a ruined, blood-stained painting to the mix,” Barty gave him a nudge towards the plane.

“Freak out,” Marlene interjected. “Is he going to yell at us for letting James get shot? Because in our defence it was a very frightening time and James didn’t say anything when it happened– sorry James,” she gave him a small smile.

“No, he’s not going to yell, it's going to be…different. My definition of a Regulus freak out and your definition of a Regulus freak out are completely different. Like when I was shot, he just sort of– it’s,” Barty seemed at a loss for words. “It’s different than yelling, it’s more like, you don’t know just how much Regulus cares until you know. You know? He takes things like this pretty hard.”

Sirius let out a derisive snort as he and Marlene loaded up the large paintings between them first. He seemed to be close to saying something when Evan bounded over.

“All of you needed to be on that plane two fucking minutes ago. Move. Now,” he glared at Marlene and Sirius as they scuttled towards the plane. “There’s two boxes at the front of the plane. One for your gun, the other for your headset. You’ll know when you see them,” Evan called after them. “Drop them in when you pass.”

James began following more slowly behind them. He wasn’t even bleeding that much. He could still help. It was hard to think clearly with the ringing in his head and his eyes stung like there had been sand blown in them. He was struggling. He needed to be useful. He needed something to do, some sense of temporary purpose, some distraction. He climbed the first three steps up to the plane before he turned his head to check on Barty and Evan. They were standing close together, their heads bent and nearly touching as they whispered quietly. Evan had a hand placed gently on Barty’s arm and James had the feeling that he was witnessing something he wasn’t supposed to see. He looked away quickly to give them their privacy even though they were completely out in the open.

James let his feet carry him up the last few steps and he felt the cool air conditioned air hit his face. This plane was bigger than the one they had come in. The walkway was wider, there were more rows. Marlene, Sirius, Lily, and Mary bounded past him.

“Sorry James we have to get the last paintings from the van,” Lily said as her streak of red hair disappeared down the steps.

“I already told Regulus about your wound. And that you’re not particularly talking right now either. Peter’s waiting for you,” Marlene called.

The front of the plane housed paintings. Some paintings were tied to the seats, some were laid flat and secured on the floor. Then there was a curtain, a small threshold that led to the back half of the aeroplane.

Remus was on him instantly, pulling him towards the back of the plane by his arm after he checked it was the uninjured one.

“Oh God, James. Marlene said you were shot. We were so worried,” he breathed out.

“It’s not that bad,” James heard himself mumble as Remus pushed him down in a seat. Peter came over too with a bunch of supplies in his hands and let out a sigh of relief upon looking at James’ arm.

“Yeah well Marlene didn’t mention that part. Just that you were shot and not speaking. Jesus, James,” Remus stared at his arm with wide eyes.

James didn’t respond. Dorcas moved from the front of the plane to the seat right in front of James. She turned around in her seat to get a better look as Peter inspected the wound. Even though she wasn’t speaking to keep out of everyone's way, James could feel her silent support and care anyway.

“It doesn’t look too bad. It’s just a graze,” Peter said definitively, sanitising his hands before snapping on some latex gloves. “You’ll be fine mate, won’t even need stitches,” he gave James a reassuring smile.

“Where’s Regulus,” James asked quietly.

“I’m right here, love. I’m right here.” Regulus’ voice came from behind James, and he felt a cold, steadying hand caress his face gently.

James tilted his head back so that he was staring up at Regulus and he felt himself calm down. As best as he could, he gave Regulus a loose smile. “Oh, hi. I didn’t see you. You just snuck up on me.”

His facial features were clouded and his dark eyebrows were furrowed in a heavy expression. His mouth was downturned as he bit the bottom of his pink lip harshly. James was about to lean up to kiss his sombre expression away when Peter began to speak.

“The wound is a little high up on your bicep, I don’t have good access with your shirt, do you mind taking it off for me?”

James’ mind still felt foggy. He was tired, so tired, and speaking took up too much energy. But he didn’t want to worry Regulus anymore than he already was. He wished he could pull himself together like Marlene and Sirius and hell, even Barty, but his mind kept wandering back to his mum. She was at home with his dad thinking that James had abandoned them for a life of crime, thinking that he was a bad person. That they had raised their son to be a bad person. Who knows what they had told her? Eventually, he nodded and peeled off the top layer. Little shards of glass that he missed from the car window sprinkled around him.

He was wearing a white t-shirt underneath, which gave Peter decent access to his arm. The bottom of his sleeve was stained slightly with blood, but it wasn’t too bad.

“Okay, I’m going to talk you through this. It’s just a graze. I’ll clean it, put antiseptic on it to prevent infection, and bandage it up. You’ll have to keep it dry for 48 hours and I'll look at it then to make sure it’s healing well and it’s not infected.” Peter’s voice was calm and authoritative. Everyone else was so calm, it was helping.

James could hear Barty and Evan and everyone else come in on the plane. They were upfront, most likely tying down the remaining paintings, and then they would be ready to take off.

“Can I help you fly the plane,” James asked, wincing as Peter cleaned his wound with sharp smelling alcohol.

Regulus was delicately picking out the shards of glass that were still in James’ hair.

“Hm, no. I’m not flying the plane this time,” Regulus murmured softly. “And even if I was I wouldn’t let you help.”

“But if you’re not–”

“It’s Kreacher. He’s an old friend,” Regulus cut in.

“Kreacher? We’re old friends too,” James smiled softly. “He was your driver, he drove me a long time ago, and he can fly planes? What the fuck, Regulus? He was in England.”

“And now he’s here.”

James was feeling better. He was trying to feel better so that people wouldn’t worry about him. They had other things to worry about. They didn’t need to worry about him.

“Give him all the morphine you got Peter,” Barty called, running down the aisle. “He deserves it. Also, maybe it’ll pull him out of his weird haze.”

“His weird haze is shock, idiot,” Dorcas shook her head.

“No, I’m okay. I’m fine,” James shook his head quickly, wincing slightly at his headache.

Upon seeing Barty, Regulus patted James’ head gently before he walked into the aisle and pushed past Remus and Peter and wrapped him in a hug.

Barty laughed in surprise at first but hugged him back just as tightly, leaning down slightly to rest his chin on Regulus’ shoulder.

“You were fucking brilliant Barty. So fucking brilliant.”

James could tell from where he was sitting that Regulus’ hands were shaking violently.

“Ah, you know me. I’m alright. I’m always alright,” he patted Regulus’ back a few times before they broke away. The whole thing lasted mere seconds. Anyone who blinked would’ve missed it entirely.

“Fuck, give us all the morphine you got too,” Evan added with a grin. “Everyone’s had a hell of a night. Regulus is hugging people again.”

“James is in shock,” Remus echoed questioningly.

“Yeah, I think we were all pretty shocked when the fucking bullets started raining down but the rest of us are–”

“Okay Barty,” Regulus interrupted warningly, shaking his head.

All around him, little reunions were happening. Marlene had practically knocked Dorcas over by jumping in her arms. Lily and Mary were seated and buckled, talking animatedly and occasionally looking back to James. Lily gave him a thumbs up and James tried to smile back at her. Barty and Evan had opted to take their seats next to each other as well. Evan had taken some of Peter’s supplies and was cleaning up the shallow cuts on Barty’s face from the broken glass.

Remus was spending his time alternating between looking at James worriedly and looking down the aisle at Sirius, who was standing alone at the front of the plane. He tried beckoning Sirius forward, but Sirius shook his head. He looked incredibly pale and was staring at Regulus with wide eyes, he seemed stuck. James could tell he wanted nothing more than to jump into Remus’ arms like Marlene had done with Dorcas, but there was Regulus. Regulus who had gone back to delicately combing through James’ hair looking for glass. James motioned for Remus to go to Sirius instead, silently giving him permission to leave his side,

and Remus walked down the aisle quickly and enveloped him in an all encompassing hug. Sirius seemed to sink into his arms.

“Okay James you’re all good. Any pain,” Peter asked standing up from where he was crouching beside him.

“No. It feels like a scratch really,” James answered quickly. “I’m fine.”

Peter gave a curt nod and a smile before taking his seat.

“Reg,” James spoke, tilting his head back to look at him. “You have to talk to Sirius. Pandora was chasing us and he’s really worried that you think he had something to do with it. You need to go talk to him.”

James watched as Regulus’ worried eyes flickered from him to Sirius, who was still standing unmovable at the front of the plane, holding on to Remus. Regulus rested a hand on James’ shoulder, before kissing him softly on the forehead. “Okay, yeah. Buckle up. Kreacher will be taking off any minute. I’ll be right back.”

James watched as he walked up the aisle and leaned in to whisper something to Sirius. He also noticed how Barty and Marlene seemed to stiffen slightly as Regulus spoke and Remus’ brows furrowed as he stepped away from the brothers to take his seat. He felt the plane start to move and he opened his window to look out. The two cars were sitting on the tarmac still, right where they left them and the sky was light. He was trying his best to stay awake.

Regulus and Sirius walked down the aisle and sat behind James, talking softly. James did his best to listen in.

“Later. We’ll talk about that later.”

“But you believe me,” Sirius asked, his voice strained.

“Yes, I believe you. I believe you.”

James drifted off before he could hear anything else.

When he woke back up, the plane cabin was full of light. His headache had dissipated and he blinked a few times to adjust. Regulus had moved so that he was sitting beside James, curling up into his side as best as he could.

Barty and Evan were across from them and sleeping soundly and he could hear Marlene snoring softly. He could also make out the top of Remus’ head, sitting next to Sirius near the front of the plane.

“Oh, you’re awake,” Regulus breathed.

“Were you watching me sleep,” James asked giving a weak smile. “How long was I out?”

“I was. Only a few hours. We have about three hours until we land,” Regulus answered softly. “Are you hungry? Thirsty?”

“Uh yeah,” James nodded feeling incredibly thirsty all of a sudden. He began fumbling around for the button on the side of his seat like Marlene had shown him all those months ago, but couldn’t find it.

“Everything’s upfront this time,” Regulus said softly, looking at James’ flailing hand. “Come on.”

They both unbuckled and wandered to the front of the plane and through the closed, semi-transparent curtain. He looked at the rows and rows of art and smiled softly to himself, singling out the pieces he took. A surge of pride went through him until he remembered his mum, and his smile quickly dropped.

James made a brief stop in the bathroom. He cleaned himself up, he brushed his teeth with the single use plastic toothbrushes that were provided, he splashed cool water on his face, he took a lot of deep breaths. He looked at his bandaged arm in the mirror.

Then, he stepped out and met Regulus at the very front of the plane, across from the entrance, in a small alcove that housed water and non-perishable food. This plane really had everything. Regulus handed him a water bottle and regarded him carefully. James had the sneaking suspicion that Regulus had been thinking very hard about his next words, and he braced himself for their impact.

Regulus closed his eyes and took a deep breath before he began speaking. “James,” he whispered so quietly that James had to lean in just a little bit just to hear him better. His hands were shaking as he reached up to cup James’ face delicately. Gently, his fingertips ghosted across his skin and James leaned into the touch. “I’m so sorry,” his voice snagged. “I’m so sorry. How can you possibly forgive me?”

James opened his eyes and stared into Regulus’ grey ones. They were grey today. James always thought that they would change slightly from green to grey based on his emotions, but he was also convinced he was making that up too. Remus seemed to think so, at the very least. “I forgive you, Regulus. You didn’t do anything. It wasn’t your fault. I always knew this could happen, right? It’s okay.”

“If you want to leave me, I'll understand. I understand.” Regulus’ voice came out thin and watery and he retracted his hands from James’ face. His whole body was shaking slightly. “I ruin things. I ruin people. So you can leave. I just, I won’t blame you. I won’t be angry.”

“Regulus what are you talking about I–”

"I’m talking about the fact that you got shot, James. You got shot and,” his voice cracked, “and I wasn’t there. I wasn’t there because I was worried that I would act like this pathetic mess if I was with you.” Regulus was crying now and wiping away the tears from his face as quickly as they fell, roughly with the palms of his hands. It was almost as if he was afraid to let his tears fall down his face. Like if he could catch them or stop them from falling, they wouldn’t be real. “I was worried I would get scared and I wouldn’t let you go in the museum at all. I was worried that I wouldn’t be able to go through with it or mess up the timing all because I wanted you next to me for a few moments longer and you were shot. And I wasn’t

there. So if you want to leave, I understand. I wasn't there for you when I should have been. I wasn't there."

There it was again, that Regulus that looked so frightened. The Regulus that looked so young and vulnerable, James could see him as a child crystal clear in his mind.

"Sorry," Regulus wiped his eyes quickly and stood up straighter, misinterpreting James' silence. "Sorry, I'm fine. I didn't mean to get all…emotional about this. It's not fair to you."

James took a moment to sift through his bewilderment. The notion that he would leave Regulus, the notion that he would ever, willingly walk away was incomprehensible to him. It wasn't the bullet that had rattled him so much, or even the thought that he could have died. James put his life in Regulus' hands a long time ago; he would go happily if that was what was required of him. It was the fact that Regulus wasn't there, that he hadn't seen him. The problem wasn't that he wanted to leave Regulus, it was the exact opposite. He never wanted to leave Regulus' side.

"I'm not going anywhere, Reg," James leaned forward and kissed him softly. "I'm not going anywhere. The bullet barely touched me. I'm not going anywhere."

Regulus let out a soft sigh of relief as James kissed him again. And again. And again. Just in case words weren't enough, he needed Regulus to know. He needed Regulus to feel it.

"I'm fine. I'm fine," James whispered eventually, in an attempt at further reassurance. His words however, didn't have the desired effect. Regulus seemed to stiffen at this as he opened his eyes and took a small step back from him. He unclasped their hands quickly, which had somehow become entwined with one another.

"James," Regulus said carefully, looking at him with a stern gaze. "It's okay if you're not fine. You don't have to be okay all the time."

"No, I know," James heard himself say weakly, but even he could tell he didn't mean it. He wasn't even sure why he was saying it. It was just easier to be fine. It was easier for everyone if he was fine, but his chest felt heavy. "It's just, you have so much to do already and–" James felt a small lump in his throat begin to form.

"You're allowed to not be okay, James."

"-I can manage on my own, truly, and–"

"You're allowed to fall apart sometimes."

"I'm fine, I'll be fine," he finished with an unconvincing hiccup.

"It was a scary situation. It was horrible, James. I saw the car with the windows all shattered, Sirius told me about Pandora about…what she said. What happened. About your mum."

James' breath caught in his throat. Regulus had been searching all around his heart, looking for the bruise, pressing and sqeezing lightly, and once he found it–once he pressed on it, just

a little, James couldn't handle it. Oh, he couldn't handle it, and he found himself collapsing into Regulus, stumbling into his arms.

Regulus had led them both to the floor so they were sitting in the middle of the aisle between the rows of plane seats containing all the paintings. Well, Regulus was sitting, James was partially laying in Regulus' arms more than he was sitting, and he was grateful that the curtain separating the two plane cabins was still drawn, so that everyone else couldn't see him.

Regulus' arms wrapped around him tightly as he stroked his hair soothingly. He let himself succumb to Regulus' calming touch and let himself be for a moment, let himself dissolve into the floor, under Regulus' touch. It was funny, in the two and a half decades James had been alive there were very few instances that he could recall where someone had held him like this. He was always the comforter, never the comforted. Always the holder and never the held.

He was vaguely aware that he was crying, which would be extremely embarrassing considering no one else from the chase had cried, but somehow he knew with Regulus that it would be okay. Regulus was still holding him and murmuring soothing things in his ear. Occasionally, he would wipe James' tears away gently with the pad of his thumb.

"I have to see my mum, Reg," James croaked out once he trusted himself enough to speak.

Regulus was very quiet and his movements stilled.

"This whole time, I never even thought about how this would affect her. I never thought she would find out, but she has and I," he took a huge gulp of air, "I have to see her. To explain."

Regulus still wasn't speaking. James shifted so he could look up at him, to see what he was thinking, but he wished he hadn't. He could tell by the pained look on Regulus' face, that seeing Euphemia would be out of the question.

"*Oh*," James heard himself say softly.

Regulus squeezed him a little tighter. "I'm so sorry, James. I'm so sorry."

James let out little sobs, as quietly as possible, as he felt things begin to crumble again.

She doesn't think this is you.

She doesn't think this is you.

She doesn't think this is you.

He just got mixed up with the wrong people. That was all. But these wrong people were people that he loved and people that loved him. These wrong people were his friends. Friends who he laughed with and broke bread with and friends who would risk their lives to save him. These wrong people had goals and aspirations, they had dreams of falling in love and starting a family. They liked dancing and singing off-key and strawberry wine and making inappropriate jokes. These wrong people were so human, and so full of life and love that they

weren't wrong at all, they were just ordinary people brought together by extraordinary circumstances. They were exactly the right people for him.

"Am I a bad person, Regulus?" It was a quiet question, but James' voice trembled with the weight of it, nonetheless.

"No," Regulus' answer was automatic. It was that same tone he took when he wanted to assure everyone there was no room for error. No doubt. "No James. You're not a bad person. You're so good. You're so fucking good. You have to listen to me, please."

Regulus grabbed both sides of James' face with his hands, forcing James to look at him.

"Anyone who has known you for even the briefest of moments would be able to tell that you're a good person. You couldn't be bad James. You could never be bad. It's impossible."

James felt himself nod. He felt like a small child and he let himself be held like a small child, but he could tell that the nod wasn't enough. He could see it in Regulus' eyes that Regulus knew James didn't believe him.

"Do you think Barty and Evan are bad people?"

"What?"

"Do you think Barty and Evan are bad people?"

James thought about it for a moment. He thought of Barty trying to talk him through his panic during the car chase while he simultaneously was trying to keep all of them alive. He thought about his eagerness to bust through the museum doors to protect him and Sirius. He thought of Evan always looking out for Regulus, making sure he was okay and he had everything he needed. And the way he would pull James aside to check in from time to time.

"No. No, they're not bad people. Maybe they've done some bad things, but that doesn't make them bad people," James answered definitively.

Regulus hummed softly. "Then you need to be kinder to yourself my love. Give yourself the same grace and understanding you give everyone else." Regulus leaned down and kissed his forehead. James let his eyes flutter closed as he focused all of his senses on feeling his lips and he couldn't help feeling as if Regulus was trying to press all of these truths into him, to make him feel them too. James let him.

"We'll call your mum, okay? I'm sorry. I'm sorry that you can't see her. But when we land, you call her. You can call her," Regulus resumed stroking his hair and James kept his eyes closed.

"Thank you," he murmured over and over again. "Thank you, thank you, thank you."

They stayed that way for a while and James nodded in and out of sleep as Regulus continued to hold him, not daring to let go.

“Barty, Evan, Sirius, I need you up here now,” Regulus’ voice carried, jolting James awake again. It was no longer the soft tone it had been previously, but now it was hardened. It was dangerous.

Barty was the first to push past the curtain. James was going to stand up, but Regulus was still holding him and seemed as if he had no intention to move, so James opted not to move. He didn’t really want to anyway.

“You two have been back here for ages we thought you were fuckkkk-” he looked at the expression on Regulus’ face and switched mid-sentence, “--ing just hanging out up here. That’s all.”

Evan and Sirius followed closely behind. If they were going to say anything about James laying on the floor of the plane in Regulus’ lap, the death glare Regulus was sending all of them, persuaded them against it.

They stood around in an awkward configuration, staring down at Regulus. “Someone told the police where we were,” Regulus began calmly, but his voice was venomous. He was speaking very lowly so that the sound didn’t carry to the others in the back of the plane. “You’re all here because I’m in an impossible situation, and you’re the only ones I can trust.”

“You think this is an inside job,” Evan’s eyes went wide.

“And you’re letting the fucking ex-cop up here with us,” Barty asked, jabbing his finger towards Sirius.

“Sirius didn’t do this,” Regulus answered quickly. “He could’ve overpowered you while you were distracted during the chase. He didn’t. If he knew what was coming, he would have demanded to be in the same van as Remus. He didn’t. If Sirius did this, then none of us would be on this plane right now. We would all be behind bars.”

Sirius looked more than relieved at Regulus’ sentiments and slightly cocky at his praise, but everyone else appeared worried.

“Remus didn’t do this either,” James said, sitting up for the first time in a while. “He wouldn’t do that to me, and he wouldn’t risk you thinking it was Sirius either. He wouldn’t do that.”

Regulus’ facial expression remained unreadable.

“No, my thoughts exactly, James,” Sirius nodded vehemently at him.

“Listen,” Regulus said quickly. “I don’t know for certain that it was an inside job. I need some time to think through this. The whole situation is…odd. If there is a mole then why not lead the police directly to the museum? Catch everyone in the act? Why hide in the streets along our exit routes? But, how would the police know that we were there? That location, that night, that time? How would they know that without help? And Pandora and Frank were there and they’re INTERPOL so that means it can’t be random. They had to know an art crime was being committed,” Regulus was muttering more to himself than to the others. He

was thinking out loud as his eyes flicked back and forth, thinking through things, but not focusing on anything. “It’s possible that we tripped a silent alarm that Dorcas just missed? Which alerted the police to the Braxton but by the time they got there we were already driving away.”

“Would that give them ample time to catch up with us though before we made it to the airport,” Barty asked.

“And it doesn’t account for the INTERPOL agents,” Evan added.

“Which is why I think it’s an inside job,” Regulus nodded firmly. “I’m going to have Dorcas do some work for me when we land. Review the footage, look into surrounding traffic cameras to see where the police came from, that sort of thing. But it’s not exactly like I can walk out there and accuse the rest of them of being a mole,” Regulus frowned.

“Why not? Barty and I can scare the shit out of them. At least one of them knows something,” Evan looked in the direction of where everyone else was sitting and looked positively terrifying.

“Accusing people of betrayal isn’t the best way to continue team trust,” Sirius spoke up now. “The ones who are innocent will be offended at best, mutinous at worst. We still have to sell these paintings to see any kind of profit. We need the team working cohesively and together. Not to mention it’ll breed mistrust and doubt. Suspicion doesn’t bode well for success.”

“Who’s to say the rat won’t rat again,” Barty snorted derisively. “They fuck us when we’re trying to sell?”

James wasn’t even entirely sure there was a mole on the inside. He couldn’t possibly fathom anyone betraying the heist. They all agreed to take part in it. They all were going to make an exorbitant amount of money from it. What could the police offer any of them that would outdo that? Maybe it was a coincidence. But James knew it couldn’t be. The very fact that Pandora was there and calling out his name, proved it couldn’t be.

“I’m going to be doing some research of my own when we land, but I don’t think the mole will try again. They tried to take us down once, and they failed. To do it again would be too risky. Now, they still get to make out with the money.”

“And if they go to the police after the fact? What then? What if they tell the police everything after we sell all the paintings?” Barty crossed his arms, looking very much like he would like to go to the back of the plane and put a gun to everyone’s temple.

“They won’t,” Regulus answered shortly.

“How do you know that?”

“Because I’m going to find out who talked, and I’m going to kill them.”

James shuddered.

“No. No fucking murder Regulus,” Sirius shook his head quickly.

“And what if they do talk, Sirius? What if they lead the police right to you? To Remus? Whoever it was compromised the safety of everyone else here! Anyone of us could’ve died tonight. It could’ve been Remus! You want someone with that much power, that much knowledge to walk free? To have us bend to their will? I don’t fucking think so.”

“No murder,” Sirius repeated, but this time it sounded weaker, like one more word could persuade him.

James remained silent. He wasn’t sure what his role in all of this was. He didn’t want a role in all of this. Regulus was just saying that he wasn’t a bad person, and now here he was discussing murder.

“What’s the alternative,” Evan asked, challenging Sirius.

“No murder,” James spoke up strongly, looking at Regulus with all the resolve he had in him.

“Lobotomy,” Barty offered.

“We could cut out their tongue to keep them from talking,” Evan nodded.

“They could still write and type everything.”

“Okay so we take their fingers too.”

Now James was feeling queasy all over again. They were talking about one of his friends. *Not your friend if they were willing to sell you down the river,* a voice in his head cut in cruelly.

Regulus could sense James’ unease and he cut in quickly. “Okay, no murder. No murder. We’ll think of something less…violent.” He was addressing the group but looking at James sincerely. “No murder.”

James nodded. It might not be one of them. It might not be.

“For now, we carry on as normal. I’m telling you all because if you see or hear anything, *anything* that seems even a little bit off, you come to me. You tell me. I need you all on the lookout,” Regulus looked at all of them intently.

Everyone nodded their silent agreement.

“Keep your friends close and your enemies closer,” he sighed. “Barty, Evan, you two can head back. Sirius needs to stay.”

With a nod, Barty and Evan went to the back of the plane, disappearing behind the curtain to take their seats.

Regulus took another deep breath in. “James, I hate to add anymore stress to your life right now but they know your name. I already have fake documents with fake names made for everyone. Licences, passports, anything you need. I’ll give all of that to you when we land in

Amsterdam, but the account you set up for yourself, to hold all the money you'll get from the heist, it'll have to be under that pseudonym."

James nodded to show he understood. "Do you have a pseudonym?"

Sirius snorted. "Please, Regulus has fucking thirty by now I'm sure. Remember? I found you at that hotel once under the name Gilderoy Lockhart. What the fuck kind of name is that?"

"I stole a credit card off of a very annoying man once, and that was the name on it," Regulus grumbled but both him and Sirius were smiling lightly. "James? Are you okay to go sit for a minute? I have to talk to Sirius and then I'll be out before we land to talk to everyone."

"Sure yeah," James nodded standing up. His bones popped and ached from being in uncomfortable positions for so long. James began walking back, an unsettling feeling growing in his stomach with every footstep he took. He trusted all of these people, and now Regulus was telling them that one of them wanted them behind bars. One of them wanted them all to go to prison. One of them endangered their lives. But why? What did they gain?

He looked back just in time to see Regulus stare down Sirius, his eyes blazing with fire. "You're going to tell me every single fucking thing you know about Pandora Lovegood."

James pushed through the curtain and locked eyes with Remus. He walked down the aisle and flopped down in the empty seat next to him, previously occupied by Sirius.

"Are you okay, James," Remus asked softly when James sat down.

"Yeah I'm okay," he sighed. "Regulus makes things better. Just a temporary freak out that's all."

Remus nodded before he leaned over, resting his head on James' shoulder. "You scared the shit out of me. If you do that shit again, I'll kill you."

"I don't really have plans to get shot again. I didn't really have plans to get shot the first time," James let out a little laugh. He was grappling with how to tell Remus about what they had talked about up at the front of the plane because there was no way in hell that James wouldn't be telling Remus exactly what they talked about at the front of the plane. He couldn't tell Remus now, he would have to wait until they landed and were alone.

"I can't believe you're not sitting in the back of the plane this time," James shook his head as Remus let out a frustrated sigh.

"Listen, I told Sirius that in the event of a plane crash, most survivors were in the back of the plane, but he called bullshit. He's a front of the plane kind of person. We had to compromise, if we think the plane is about to go down, we'll just run to the back real quick and sit there," Remus laughed lightly at the little absurdity.

"Well that sounds like a good plan," James smiled, imagining Remus making a mad dash to the back of the cabin at slight turbulence.

“So,” Remus began softly, changing the subject. “Marlene told me about the chase while you were asleep and Sirius too, but do you want to talk about it? I could always use a third version of events.”

And so James told him. James told him about Pandora and his mum and Sirius and Marlene having more sense than him to crouch down when the bullets started. He told him about Rothko and throwing up and the insanely loud classical music that made the speakers shake. He told him about Barty who, even though he seemed slightly panicked, was focused on making sure everyone else was calm. And Remus listened. He listened like it was the first time he had heard the story, and in a way it was. Remus was someone who liked to know everything. He liked to obtain a complete picture, so he always treated each perspective like another piece to the narrative puzzle. He was always searching for the most accurate answer.

“What about you,” James asked when he had finished recounting his story. “I’ve yet to hear about what happened with the car that chased your van.”

Remus let out a puff of air. “Well they didn’t shoot at us for starters. I know you said time seemed to slow down for you but for me, the whole thing is sped up, like a blur. After Barty whipped around us and made that turn, Regulus started driving insanely crazy. The car behind us they put on their lights and sirens and I just knew they could see everything in the vehicle. I knew we were fucked, like they were looking into the car and seeing a Titian painting looking back at them. Regulus told us all to duck down and draw our guns. He was incredibly calm, like the whole thing had gone completely as expected. It made me feel like he knew what he was doing at the very least. Then a man came over on a microphone. Frank. He introduced himself and then,” Remus trailed off for a moment, his voice going quiet. “And then he started talking to Regulus. He was saying some pretty nasty things. He knew things about Sirius and Regulus’ relationship. He accused Regulus of ruining his life and said he was the reason Sirius couldn’t move on or do anything for himself. He told Regulus that he was tainting the lives of everyone around him just to make money for the heist, that he was a force of destruction, that he was selfish for dragging Sirius into his plans. It was bad.”

Every word that Remus spoke landed like a punch to James’ stomach. How could anyone say that to Regulus? Why didn’t Regulus tell him? Frank knew how to hit where it hurt apparently.

“He kept trying to get Regulus to pull over, but Regulus had made some good distance and we all knew he could hear Frank, but he certainly wasn’t acting like it. Then he did something, like, I don’t even know what he did, maybe we flew for a minute, but then the cops lost sight of us. We could still hear their sirens and see their flashing lights in the distance, but they weren’t behind us anymore. They weren’t even going in the same direction as us. We hadn’t completely gotten rid of them quite yet, but it was clear we were going to and then Barty told us about you freaking out and then Regulus wasn’t so calm anymore.”

James looked away, a bit embarrassed that he had caused all this panic.

“Even I could see he was gripping the steering wheel too tight. I was afraid it might snap in half and Dorcas had to yell at him to open his eyes so he could watch the road. He was trembling all over and that’s when I started to freak out. But then, he just took a few deep breaths and talked to you like, like nothing was wrong. Like you were fine and he was fine

and everything was fine it was," Remus shook his head at the recollection. "It was pretty brave of him I think. To pull himself together for everyone else's sake. To put his shit aside. It's not easy."

"No," James said quietly. "No, it's not."

Then, when Remus started talking about when the cops started shooting, he was more focused on recounting how worried he was for Sirius. Which was more than understandable to James, but as Remus was speaking he thought about Regulus, and how frightened he must have been. After being berated by Frank and then hearing that they were being shot at, it was a wonder that Regulus was able to stand upright, let alone continue forward with the heist.

"Okay, Phase two," Regulus called out emerging from behind the curtain. It was loud enough that those who were asleep stirred awake and sat up, rubbing the sleep out of their eyes. Sirius emerged too, passing water down the aisle. "We're about to land in Amsterdam where we'll make the first drop. When we land, I'm taking the paintings to a storage facility I have set up. There, I will appraise and catalogue everything so I can figure out where we are in terms of money. We'll all be staying at the same hotel in different rooms for a week before we move on."

Sirius had moved to stand upfront with Regulus. "When we land, we'll pass out folders with pertinent information. Times to meet, what to expect, how to act. There will also be information in there regarding extradition laws and the safest places to stay after the heist is complete. You will be issued new documents. Passports, drivers licences, all of that, so it's easy to assume a new identity."

Whatever had happened between Sirius and Regulus behind the curtain had caused an evident shift in their relationship. They were standing side by side, arms crossed, stern expressions on their faces. There was no doubt in James' mind where Sirius' loyalties were. Sirius and Regulus were a team now, and they looked absolutely terrifying.

"I cannot impress upon you all enough how dangerous this next part is. You've been in class, you've heard me speak, you've learned all the skills necessary to sell these paintings. Selling these works is the only thing that stands between you and millions. But don't get complacent, the hard part is still to come." Regulus' eyes were dark and brooding. He was looking at all of them with an intensity that made James shift in his seat. James could tell that both he and Sirius were making mental calculations of them all, trying to determine who the mole was by body language alone.

"You'll all know more when we land, for now just sit tight. We'll be in Amsterdam soon," Sirius added as a note of finality. He allowed no room for questions. Regulus moved to his seat at the back of the plane and James patted Remus' leg before he got up to follow him. Sirius took his seat next to Remus quickly.

"James," Marlene turned around in her seat to give him a soft smile. "I owe you like two hundred dollars or something. Don't let me forget!"

"Why," James asked, mirroring her infectious grin.

“Because you got shot. You called it on day one and here I thought it was impossible,” she gave him a look like it was glaringly obvious. “I feel like I owe it to you.”

“Don’t worry about it,” James shook his head quickly and Marlene rolled her eyes.

“I’m sorry she fucked with you like that,” Marlene added sincerely, now only her eyes peaked above the aeroplane seat. “You didn’t deserve that, James. You’re the best of us, truly.”

“Thanks Marls,” James flashed her a grateful smile.

“Is there a reason why the cops knew where we were,” Dorcas spoke up, directing her question at Regulus who was tracing light patterns on James’ hand.

“Oh,” Regulus blinked. “Don’t worry. I’m handling it. It’s under control,” he responded firmly despite dancing around the question.

Dorcas raised an inquisitive eyebrow, but didn’t press any further as she and Marlene both turned back around.

James and Regulus sat in silence for a little while, listening to everyone’s conversations happening around them. Lily and Mary were talking amicably with Barty and Evan which was a nice surprise from Mary, considering she hadn’t ever really gotten over the way they treated Remus. Dorcas and Marlene were murmuring to one another.

“And then, I dropped a screw and it started rolling. And you know how hard it is to find a single screw in the dark like that,” Marlene was recounting to Dorcas. “I thought I could just find it quickly without Regulus ever knowing but that he came over the headset. He just said my name. All he said was *Marlene* , but it was so terrifying. You know? He took that tone of voice that sounded like, don’t fuck this up or I’ll murder you slowly.”

Dorcas let out a laugh.

“Anyway, I found it in a second. It wasn’t a big deal,” Marlene continued.

James turned to Regulus and was greeted with a large eye roll.

“I’m not that scary,” he whispered to James.

“Oh, yeah you are,” James answered as Regulus looked at him with round eyes. “Everytime I’m near you, my heart starts beating uncontrollably and I feel lightheaded and my face gets all flushed and I stumble through all my words. Terrifying.”

Regulus fought a smile as a light pink dusted his cheeks. He nudged James with his shoulder lightly. “Shut up.”

They went back to their comfortable silence and Regulus had gone back to tracing lazy patterns on James’ hand absentmindedly. After a little while, he seemed to be overcome with a sudden thought and looked up at James with wide eyes.

“I love you, you know,” he brought James’ hand up to his mouth and kissed his knuckles. “I love you so much.”

His eyes were that perfect shade of green again, the calm after the storm. The softness seeping in. James couldn’t help the way his heart quickened at the words.

“I love you,” he murmured back, relishing the way it sounded coming from his mouth. “I love you, and I’m glad we’re here, together.”

At that, Regulus leaned across the seat and began kissing him. It started light and sweet and soft but it quickly turned more intense. For a moment James forgot exactly where he was. The outside world melted away, and there was just Regulus. Only Regulus. Regulus’ mouth on his, his curls brushing against his face, his cold hands touching him everywhere, leaving trails of fire in their wake.

James needed to distract himself, and Regulus, before this situation escalated. “What’s in Amsterdam again,” James murmured, his mind cloudy as Regulus’ lips ghosted over his pulse point and along his jawline. Neither of them cared too much that they were in public, they were in the back anyway.

“Avery,” Regulus whispered softly before swiping his tongue over James’ bottom lip. “And weed. And Rembrandt.”

James let out a soft groan, hoping the others wouldn’t hear. He couldn’t be in Regulus’ presence like this, it was too intoxicating. “Reg,” he gasped lightly. “You have to stop.”

“Have you ever joined the mile high club, James? There’s a lavatory in the back,” Regulus murmured lowly in his ear, his hands lightly roaming over James’ t-shirt. Teasing.

“We’re about to land,” James kissed him fervently, breathlessly. “You know we can’t. You’re being mean.”

“Mh hm,” Regulus sighed, pulling away eventually. James made a slight noise of protest as he tried to get his breathing back to normal. “I am,” Regulus grinned wickedly. “There will be plenty of time to join the mile high club later I suppose.”

Regulus leaned back in his chair, as if he were completely unaffected by the whole interaction and laughed softly to himself as James let out a huff of frustration as he felt the plane begin its slow descent.

Chapter End Notes

I love you all!!! Thank you for reading, thank you for your kindness, thank you for everything!! See you next chapter xoxo <3333

Chapter 30: Amsterdam

Chapter Summary

suspicion, angst, art, sunflowers, meeting with criminals…just another day in the life of Regulus Black

Chapter Notes

the feminine urge to post this chapter and then stay off the internet 5ever bc im so nervous about everyone's reactions to it but ily all so much <3 okay see u next chapter

also, I know this chapter is hella long, I may have gotten carried away, sorry! i'm committed to the chapter numbers now though!

tw: brief very mild sexual content, mild drug use, guns

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Amsterdam seemed to exist in its own world apart from the regular seasonal cycle. Even though the sun was out, the air had a slight chill to it and the sky was still more grey than blue. There were two cars waiting on the tarmac when they landed, similar to the ones they had left behind, but both had their windows completely intact. It was odd, almost like a ghost town. No one else was there, no one came to greet them or check their passports or issue them through customs. Just two black vans with completely tinted windows.

It was easy enough for Sirius. Untying the paintings and retying them in the back of the vans. Back and forth he made the trips in silence, observing everyone around him. He kept waiting for someone to slip up, for someone to say something incriminating, for someone to act out of the ordinary. He began replaying past interactions with everyone in his mind silently searching for answers.

"Hey, you alright," Remus asked, eyeing him with concern.

Sirius nodded, momentarily pulled out of his thoughts. "Yeah, I'm fine. Just tired," he tried to smile at him reassuringly. Remus looked so wonderful, even sleep deprived and exhausted, he was the most beautiful person Sirius had ever seen. Each time he looked at him, Sirius felt a little jolt of electricity shoot through his veins.

Back and forth they went, plane to car to plane to car. They lugged art, they lugged their suitcases, they counted their blessings that everyone was alive and out of the country. Quietly,

he looked over at Regulus who was standing off to the side watching everyone move. He was spinning the car keys on his index finger and though he had put on sunglasses, Sirius could tell that he was also sizing everyone up. He was making calculations, determining where everyone stood on a scale of one to traitor. Sirius was just glad he found himself above suspicion, he was glad to be believed, glad to be in the clear.

Now Sirius was desperately trying to cling to the belief that he was a sensible man. He wanted to believe he was rational and made fully formed, well thought out decisions, but he also couldn't help the nagging feeling that he was rapidly slipping further and further away from rationality even though it wasn't fully his fault. He felt as if everyone else around him had also been complicit in slipping away from rationality. Why else would Frank Longbottom say the things he had to Regulus? Words Sirius had said when he was drunk and angry and hurt, words that were never meant to be heard by anyone, least of all Regulus. Frank knew, he knew what Regulus meant to Sirius. He used things Sirius had told him as a friend, to advance his career. It put a bitter, metallic taste in his mouth. He hadn't even been in the same car as Regulus, he hadn't even heard Frank's words first hand, but he didn't need to. He could hear it in the way Regulus' voice trembled, he could see it in the way Regulus had to blink the tears out of his eyes when he was recounting Frank's words, that he had cut deep. Regulus was good at hiding the bleeding though and even though his body language betrayed him slightly his words remained cool and removed from the whole situation. Sirius knew he was trying not to think about it. Sirius knew that he would put it on the back burner for as long as he could until it would all come rushing forward, maybe when he was trying to sleep and it was dark and quiet, maybe when he stopped moving just enough to let his thoughts catch up with him. They were similar that way.

So maybe it was irrational for him to commit his energy to finding the mole. Maybe it was irrational to forego his previous boundaries, and let down his walls a little bit more in order to work with Regulus– in order to help him find the leak, and to put a stop to them. Maybe it was irrational for Sirius to hand over information about Frank and Pandora to Regulus. But then, Frank should have thought about the consequences of his actions before he opened his mouth. The mole should have thought through the implications of their treachery going wrong, of the police opening fire. Remus could've been killed, or at the very least hurt. And Regulus, well, Regulus was hurt. Not physically, but Sirius could tell. It twisted his insides to see it. There was a time when he would've relished in the feeling, or at least pretended to, but now he received no satisfaction from it. Now that he knew that Regulus wanted to fix things just as much as he did, hurting each other was counterintuitive.

When they had finished loading everything into the cars, Sirius wasn't surprised to see his brother toss one set of car keys to Barty. It was always Barty Regulus trusted with everything, always Barty Regulus told all of his secrets too. Sirius tried to quelm the bitter jealousy that Barty always seemed to inspire in him, he tried to swallow it down, but the acidity was always there, always sharp.

So he wasn't surprised when Regulus tossed one set of keys to Barty, but he was surprised when Regulus tossed the other set of keys to him. So surprised in fact, that he fumbled with the keys when they came sailing at him through the air and he dropped them to the ground with a loud clatter.

Regulus just rolled his eyes before he began speaking to the group that had huddled between the two vehicles on the tarmac. Sirius was about to scoff at the way James was practically glued to his side but then Remus wrapped a strong arm around his waist and pulled him closer, and he decided to keep quiet.

“We’re headed to a storage facility not too far from here. When we get there we’ll unload all of the paintings and then we’ll go to the hotel. Everyone has their own room under their new fake identity names but given the recent developments,” Regulus looked around at everyone for a moment, “I suppose half of those rooms will remain empty.”

Marlene and James snickered.

“You’re all encouraged to check in at different times to avoid suspicion. You know what you’re supposed to do, and we’ll meet tomorrow to discuss what everything looks like moving forward.”

Sirius could tell that Regulus was being incredibly vague on purpose; he wasn’t apt to share anything when someone here wasn’t trustworthy.

“In the meantime,” Regulus continued, “you’re free to explore the city, get some sleep, adjust to the time change, and if you need anything… don’t,” he finished. “You all have the cash I gave you?”

He looked around and everyone nodded quickly. “Then the last thing to do is split up into the cars. Marlene you’ll ride with me, Sirius, James, and,” Regulus trailed off, looking perturbed for a moment. “No. Evan, Barty, Mary, Peter…no. Actually I want… oh fuck.”

He was floundering. Everyone glanced at each other nervously and shuffled their feet. It was evident that they had never seen Regulus like this before. Indecisive and questioning. Sirius knew why he was doing it.

“Does it matter? I mean it’s not like the police followed us all the way here,” Marlene laughed, trying to ease the tension.

Evan eyed her carefully. “How are you so sure they didn’t? Do you know something we don’t, McKinnon?”

“Other than the fact the police were in America and we flew across the ocean? No,” she returned, souring at Evan’s slightly hostile tone. “Last time I checked though, they had no idea where we were going.”

“Sirius, me, James, Remus, Peter. The rest of you go with Barty,” Regulus nodded decisively, subsequently ending the conversation.

They went to work filing into the cars. Sirius took the driver's seat and Regulus sat in the passenger seat.

“I never thought I’d see the day Regulus gave up driving control,” James smiled as he slid into the back seat.

Regulus turned around and peered at James from behind the leather seat. “The cyclists here, they make me a little…I just think it’s best if Sirius drives.”

Sirius was fumbling for a radio station, but when he saw Barty speed off, he jolted everyone forward as he pressed hard on the acceleration.

“I have no idea what day it is, what time it is, where I am,” Peter shook his head. “I feel like I’ve been picked up from one life and dropped right into the middle of another one. How’s your arm James?”

Sirius looked at everyone in the back through the rearview mirror. James was leaned up against the window and Remus was leaning on him slightly in the middle as Peter took the other seat by the window. He had dark circles under his eyes, as most of them did, thanks to the lack of sleep and high intensity environment.

“Hm? Oh, it’s fine Peter. Thanks,” James smiled softly at him. “Thanks for bandaging me up back there too.”

“Oh, don’t worry about it, it was an easy fix.”

The streets of Amsterdam were alive and busy with people walking and laughing. Sirius tried to keep right behind Barty as bikes flew past him and girls walked by with bundles of flowers in their hands and bright smiles. It was going well enough. Everyone was quiet, lost in their own reverie. Sirius could feel Regulus’ mind next to him working through a million and one possibilities. He had his forehead resting against the cool glass of the window, but his eyes were open.

Sirius was also trying to figure out what to do. He felt surprisingly numb after the day's events all unfolded. He knew there would come a moment where he had to mourn the loss of a friend, because he and Frank could never go back to what they were. Regulus had sworn up and down on the plane that he would take full blame for the heist, that Sirius could go back to Frank and Alice and tell them that he had acted under duress and that his actions were the results of threats. Regulus pleaded and ensured that Frank was fine and that they could go back to being friends after the heist, that Regulus wouldn’t be mad or try to stop him. But then Regulus had also whispered, so quietly that Sirius almost missed it, that he couldn’t be responsible for ruining such a good part of Sirius’ life, and he knew. Sirius knew Regulus was cracking, he was trying to hide it, but Sirius wouldn’t ever be able to forgive Frank for that. Regulus was still his little brother; it was still Sirius’ job to protect him, even all these years later, he knew that much.

Pandora, on the other hand, Regulus was not so willing to forgive. Sirius knew almost the instant James threw up out of the car window that Pandora’s days were numbered. There was nothing Regulus wouldn’t do to protect the people he loved, and he was well versed in the language of vengeance and revenge. He wanted to know everything about her, where she lived, how she operated, what her daily routine looked like, who her family was. Regulus wouldn’t kill her, Sirius knew he wouldn’t do that, but whatever he was planning would be bad. It was only a matter of time.

“So the police showing up,” Peter cleared his throat, and Sirius stiffened. “That wasn’t a part of the plan was it?”

“No,” Regulus answered flatly. “Obviously not.”

“How did they know where we were? Mary and Lily think that you know more than you’re letting on,” he said boldly.

Sirius could hear James shift uncomfortably in the backseat and Remus sat up.

“Well maybe they’re right and maybe they’re not,” Regulus snapped quickly. “I’m the fucking boss for a reason. I’m handling it. That’s all you need to know.”

Peter went very quiet at Regulus’ outburst. “I’m sorry, I just wanted to make sure everything was still okay, you know, moving forward. That we were all still safe.”

Regulus didn’t answer. Instead, Sirius made eye contact with James in the rearview mirror and curiously, he could've sworn they were both thinking the same thing. *Odd* .

Is this how it was going to be? Each time a person spoke, each time they asked a question, would it be a mark against them? Would it be their damning sentence?

“Who dropped the cars off,” Remus spoke up, eyeing Regulus curiously. “I mean how did they get here? The whole place was abandoned aside from us. There wasn’t anyone there.”

“What the fuck is this? 20 fucking questions? I know people,” Regulus spat.

“Hey,” Sirius cut in sharply. He knew why Regulus was in a temperamental mood, but he couldn’t talk to Remus like that. “I think you should watch your tone.”

Regulus turned his stone cold grey eyes to look at Sirius and he seemed about to unleash something venomous when James cut in quickly, “I think we’re all just a little tired. Right Reg?”

Regulus didn’t answer, instead he just let out a little huff before he went back to looking out the window.

Sirius would have an easier time diffusing a bomb than diffusing his brother’s anger and James was doing it with a simple sentence. Sirius cast a sly glance at Regulus and then at James. They were definitely in love.

“You let him call you Reg,” Sirius asked, unable to help the smile that formed on his face.

“No,” Regulus responded shortly.

“I just heard him do it.”

“No you didn’t. You misheard.”

“You didn’t even bother to correct him.”

“The him you’re speaking about is right here, and I call him Reg all the time. I didn’t think it was a problem,” James spoke up.

“Regulus hates it. He has tackled me to the ground before over the use of that nickname,” Sirius laughed at Regulus’ horrified expression.

“Oh that’s the goal, the dream even,” James grinned widely. “He can tackle me to the ground any day he wa–”

“James,” Regulus flung an arm into the back seat and began swatting at him. His aim was terrible though and Remus let out a little huff, as he took most of the blows.

“I didn’t know you hated it. You never said,” James continued after he had finished laughing. “I can stop.”

“No,” Regulus said far too quickly and Sirius let out another laugh. “I mean it’s okay when you do it. It’s…nice. But no one else is allowed to because then I hate it.”

“Oh, okay,” James said softly. Even Sirius could hear the fondness and warmth in his voice.

“And you,” Regulus turned to Sirius. “You are unbearable and insufferable and ridiculous, and–”

“Yeah, yeah,” Sirius dismissed with a wave of his hand. “I’m your brother. It’s my job to be that way.”

He wasn’t even thinking about it when he said it, but as soon as he had, he could feel it. It was a tiny shift and a tiny step in the right direction, and it felt right. He could tell by Regulus’ facial expression that he had felt it too. This was nice. This was better. This was almost normal brotherly teasing.

When they pulled up to the warehouse, it was hidden along a row of numerous other storage facilities. They were all painted brown and looked identical to the next one. Regulus pulled a small silver key out of his pocket and walked along the rows until he reached the unit marked with a number 326 and unlocked it. Inside was a small, temperature controlled unit to store the paintings. Then without another word, they all got to work unloading them. There was no one around to see them, but even then Regulus insisted they cover the works with white cloth just to be sure. This was comical for a number of reasons, the number one being that anyone with half a brain would be able to tell they were moving paintings.

The second reason it was funny, was because Sirius knew that this storage facility was owned by Mulciber and his men. There was no way that anything legal was happening behind these little keypadded units. No one would bat an eye if they were smuggling firearms or drugs in let alone paintings. No one else knew about Regulus’ vast connections besides Barty and maybe Evan. Sirius knew that the less everyone knew about these people, the better. You never know when you’d need plausible deniability.

“Hey,” Remus pulled him off to the side as everyone was scattered about, ensuring everything was going smoothly.

They were standing on the other side of one of the vans, out of the direct eyesight of everyone else. Remus took both of Sirius' hands in his and looked around, slightly anxious.

"So, do you want to tell me what the little boys club meeting was about on the plane?"

"What do you mean," Sirius asked, knitting his eyebrows together, playing dumb to steal a few moments.

"I mean, you and Barty and Evan and James. You were all up there and honestly, I'm curious about what was said. You all seem tense and–"

"And?"

"And I was a little surprised Regulus included you is all," Remus answered, looking guiltily at the floor. "I don't know. He's always having secret meetings with Barty and Evan and I just figured everytime he pulled James away for something, they were shagging in a backroom or something but, now you too. Why do I feel like I'm on the outside of something all of a sudden?"

"You're not on the outside of anything," Sirius whispered, kissing Remus' forehead lightly. He wanted to assure him. "Everything's fine, you have nothing to worry about."

"So, what did you talk about then?"

Sirius pulled back to look at him. He was about to open his mouth to tell Remus everything, about the traitor, about his theories, about Regulus, but a glint in Remus' eye stopped him. It was only there for a minute before it was gone and Sirius thought maybe he imagined it, but he felt a knot grow in the pit of his stomach because what if he hadn't? A slight seed of mistrust. Because hadn't it been Remus who had lied to him for weeks with a fake American accent and the most believable backstory? And wasn't it Remus who had signed up to join a criminal heist in the first place? Sirius felt guilty for thinking it, but then once he had, he couldn't stop.

Stop. Stop. Stop. You love him. He loves you. He would never do that to you. He would never do that to James. You love him. You love him. You love him.

James certainly seemed to think he was absolved of any guilt.

"I'll tell you later," Sirius heard himself say in a false nonchalant voice. "It's really nothing to worry about Moony, I promise."

Remus nodded before Sirius leaned in to kiss him, but when they pulled away, Sirius couldn't help but notice that Remus' amber eyes looked as if they had lost something important.

That knot in his stomach only grew into anger at himself and guilt as they all got back in the car and headed to the hotel. He had no idea who the traitor was, but it wasn't Remus. He wasn't sure why he had froze at that moment, why he hadn't just told him. He was so sure, just as sure as James was on the aeroplane, and he felt that same surety now, so why did he freeze when Remus was right there? He made a vow to tell him tonight at the hotel.

“James and I need the car,” Regulus spoke softly when they had parked. “We’re going out for a bit, you all do whatever it is you do.”

Sirius nodded. Concierge people came out of the hotel, all dressed in nice uniforms as they began unloading all the bags from Barty’s car. Marlene was already out, telling them which bag belonged to who and delegating them.

“Shouldn’t we have stayed in a less auspicious place,” Sirius asked. “To avoid drawing attention to ourselves?”

“I will not stay in some rundown hostel, Sirius,” Regulus replied with a note of slight disdain.

“You’re dating a rich snob,” Sirius shook his head at James who only smiled good naturedly.

They all did their little shuffle. Peter got out and headed straight to the hotel lobby. Marlene and Dorcas were chattering away about getting two bicycles and riding them along the canal and Mary and Lily asked enthusiastically to join them. Barty and Evan had left to go to a coffeeshop somewhere. James had slid into the driver's seat with a forced grin and pulled off as soon as Remus and Sirius were out of the car.

“What do you want to do? Are you tired? Do you want to walk around,” Sirius asked, wrapping his arms around Remus.

“Can we go up? I am tired,” Remus sighed and that was all Sirius needed to lead them through the lobby.

Once they were all settled in their room, and their bags were unpacked, Remus flopped himself down on the bed with a contented sigh.

“Look, Moony,” Sirius treaded lightly. “Today. About the plane conversation, um, there’s no easy way to say this but Regulus thinks the police were there because there’s a traitor. He thinks that someone told the police where we would be.”

Remus sat up and eyed him carefully, before he nodded. “And Regulus called you all back there because you’re the people he trusts.”

Sirius nodded, feeling the metallic taste come back to his mouth. Guilt? Worry?

“I see,” Remus frowned slightly.

Sirius was silent, watching his reaction carefully. He could feel his heart hammering in his chest and he wanted to apologise, he wanted to make the entire situation better somehow, but he knew he couldn’t.

“James already told me,” Remus said quietly, after a moment. “Today, um, after I tried to talk to you. But it means a lot that you told me, I didn’t have to ask you again. You said you would tell me later and you did. When we were alone and the timing was better.” His voice was light but Sirius could also hear the note of strained panic.

Oh, well if James already told him.

“Remus I know you didn’t do this. So does James. We both told Regulus as much on the plane. You’re fine okay? You have nothing to worry about.”

“Except for the fact that someone called the police on us and we’re about to start the most dangerous part of this whole operation,” Remus said flatly.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t want to worry you. We’re going to figure out who did it before the swap, don’t worry,” Sirius nodded emphatically. “Don’t worry.”

That night, they should’ve celebrated. That night they should’ve seen everything Amsterdam had to offer, and they should have had lot and lots of hot celebratory sex all over the hotel room, and made plans for the future, and they should have gotten rip-roaring drunk, but they did none of that. They took a shower, they put on their pyjamas, they called room service and ate pizza while they discussed which of their friends had betrayed them and what would happen to them once they found out who it was.

Sirius stared at the little greeting card the hotel had left on their nightstand. The big blocky yellow letters called out, ‘Welcome to Amsterdam’.

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James enclosed himself in the tiny glass box, the coins Regulus had handed him jingled in his palm. Regulus was right outside, his hands in his pockets, looking around, always vigilant. He turned towards the wind so that the curls blew away from his face.

After they had dropped everyone off at the hotel, Regulus had given James instructions to drive around, and once he was satisfied with the location, he had James park in an unknown part of the city, close to a payphone. He was intent to make good on his promise of letting James speak to Euphemia.

James went over the rules in his head. No incriminating information, nothing longer than five minutes, no confirmation on whereabouts or plans. He had to act as if the police were on the other end of the line. He listened as the coins clinked their way down the machine, he stared at the thin white script reading ‘ *telefoon* ’, he picked up the phone and dialled the number he had memorised by heart at the age of five.

It rang and rang.

There were half smoked cigarettes littering the concrete floor. Off in the distance, a woman in a red jacket waved to her friend across the street, beckoning him to cross. The man had thrown his head back in laughter, though James couldn’t hear it.

For a strange moment, James felt his heart sink and fizzle to the bottom of his chest. The line kept ringing. He hadn’t accounted for the possibility that she might not pick up. He hadn’t

thought about what he would do if she didn't answer. The sun was sinking lower and lower in the sky.

'Hello?'

James nearly staggered over at the sound of her voice.

'Mum.'

His voice was strained with the effort to hold back all of his emotions. He didn't have a lot of time, and he couldn't waste them on tears.

'James. Oh, my boy. My dear boy. Where are you? Are you alright? Are you hurt? Do I need to come get you from somewhere?'

Her voice was panicked, but James could also feel the relief through the telephone line.

'I'm fine. I'm fine mum. I'm okay. I'm somewhere safe, I'm with friends. Everything is fine. You don't have to worry about me.'

'The police were here. They were asking me and your father all sorts of outlandish questions, making accusations. They said you were in New York. James Fleamont Potter we've been in quite an uproar over here. We thought you'd be back home in a year.'

'I know.'

James' voice cracked.

'I know, mum. I'm sorry I worried you so much. I'm fine. I'm alright. Listen, I–I don't have a lot of time.'

James glanced at Regulus who was watching him with an unreadable expression. Regulus' gaze went softer when he made eye contact with James.

'I just wanted you to know that I love you, and dad. And I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry for causing you worry or pain. And I want you to know that you didn't raise a bad person. No matter what you hear or what the police want you to think. It wasn't your fault and you didn't raise a bad person. I know you and dad hate me now, and that's okay, I haven't been a good son, but it wasn't your fault. You have to know that.'

He was crying now. He could feel the tears on his face cool in the outside air. He wasn't entirely sure what he was saying, everything was coming out in a jumbled mess.

'James.'

Euphemia's voice was soft but stern. It was the same tone she would take with the monsters that hid in James' closet when he was little. The same tone she would take when he scraped his knees because he hadn't listened to her warning to stop running and he tripped.

‘Do you remember when you were a little boy and I told you one day after you broke a flower vase of mine that there was nothing you could do that would ever make me stop loving you.’

James remembered that day. He had been playing in the house and he hadn’t been aware of his surroundings. In a moment of sheer joy he had bumped into the old wooden table in the hall and knocked a flower vase over. He still remembers staring at all the pieces of broken glass on the floor as fat tears rolled down his cheeks. He thought Euphemia would kick him out of the house, he thought she would stop loving him for breaking her favourite vase, but instead, she just got to work cleaning it up while James cried. When she was done, she spent the rest of the afternoon assuring him that she loved him no matter what.

‘Yes, I remember.’

‘That whole day you kept asking me all kinds of different scenarios. Would you still love me if I coloured on all of the walls? Would you still love me if I screamed at you? If I pulled up all the flowers from the garden? If I dropped the cake you were decorating on the floor? And what did I say?’

She paused, waiting for James to answer.

‘You said that you would. That you would still love me to the moon and back, and then some.’

‘That’s right. That’s what no matter what means.’

They were both quiet for a few seconds. Her voice was warm and comforting and he wanted to hug her. He knew he didn’t have a lot of time. He could see her, standing in the hallway of her house, the glossy red phone pressed tightly to her ear. He could see the flowered wallpaper and the soft rugs that lined the hall in his childhood home. He could imagine the soft, inviting smell of good food and florals.

‘Even now, mum?’

It was barely a whisper. The lump in James’ throat containing all his sobs was getting more painful by the second.

‘Even now. You’re not a bad person, James. You’re still my son.’

There was a note of sorrow in her voice but also deep honesty. James was trembling, and he bit his lip harshly to keep it from quivering so much. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Regulus take a few steps forward towards him. Time to go. Time to hang up now.

‘I love you. Tell dad. I’ll write, okay?’

For a second James thought he could hear Euphemia sniffle from the other end of the line, but when she spoke again it was in a clear, unwavering voice.

‘I love you too. To the moon and back and then some.’

James hung up the phone with a click and leaned back against the glass of the phone booth for a moment. He closed his eyes and took deep, steadying breaths. He tuned everything else out, the daylight, the noise of the city, the glass that was supporting him. Everything fell away as he inhaled, and then exhaled. In and out.

He wasn't sure how long he was standing there, unable to open his eyes until he felt a cold hand slip into his own, and Regulus' body pressed up against his in the tiny phone booth.

"I'm sorry," James whispered after a minute. "I know we have to leave."

The scent of Regulus filled the enclosed space. He always smelled faintly of fragrant tea, no matter how much coffee he drank. It was nice, it calmed him down.

"We'll leave when you're ready," Regulus answered softly.

"She um," James tried to keep voice from wavering. He was done crying, he had done enough crying. "She still loves me," he finished with his eyes still closed. He wasn't ready to open them yet. He just needed a moment more.

"I knew she would. It's impossible not to."

James could almost hear Regulus' soft smile and he felt the warmth flood back into his chest. All wasn't lost. There was hope. Hope that the situation would be salvaged in the future.

After a little while more, James finally felt ready to leave, even though having Regulus so close was the perfect antidote to calm his tumultuous feelings. He was the cure, the answer, the constant, and James knew it was crazy, but it was also difficult to imagine being even an inch apart from him.

He let Regulus lead them along the street and to some small, nondescript café where James took a seat at the table in the corner as Regulus ordered. He smiled as two red cups of tea were placed in front of them. All around them couples and friends were chattering and laughing happily. Some were typing away furiously at their laptops with exaggerated frowns or looks of complacency, but everyone was absorbed in their own little worlds, completely unaware of the person sitting right next to them.

"Tea always makes everything better," Regulus supplied, blowing on his slightly to cool it down. "I thought we could just take a minute before we went to the hotel."

James nodded gratefully before he took a sip from his cup. "Ah, it's not the same," he sighed sadly, shaking his head. "I really prefer your tea much better."

"It's the same tea," Regulus frowned. "Literally the exact same. I think it's even been steeped for the same amount of time. If you don't like it though, I can get you something else. And I didn't even think to ask if you were hungry, sorry. I can get you some food too. What do you want? Do you want anything? Are you hungry? And the tea?"

James smiled, watching as Regulus began to fret.

“It’s fine, Reg. It’s fine. I’m not hungry, I'm good with the tea, I just like yours better is all,” James put him out of his misery. “I think it’s because you make yours with-"

“-If you say something stupid like love, James. I swear to God.”

“-Love,” James finished, smiling.

“There it is,” Regulus rolled his eyes, as he scoffed.

“I can taste the love you put into every cup of tea, Regulus Black. You can try to hide the fact that you do it, but I can taste it. You can’t hide from my tastebuds,” James smirked, self-satisfactorily.

“You are ridiculous,” Regulus shook his head, but James could see his dimples. His tiny perfect dimples from his perfect smile, and James felt his heart do that funny skip in his chest.

“You love me.”

At that, Regulus turned very serious, and his eyes went incredibly soft. “Yeah James, I do. I really do.”

They talked quietly and laughed quietly as they told each other stories. James talked about growing up and told Regulus stories from university and all the horrible decisions he made. Regulus talked about Barty and Evan and all the trouble they got into and what he liked doing as a little kid. James found himself wanting to know every little thing. He wanted to know what kind of socks Regulus used to wear, his favourite cereal, and if he knew how to ride a bike. With each passing second James felt his heart swell as he watched Regulus talk animatedly about the things and people he loved. He remembered a time, not too long ago, when it was like pulling teeth to get Regulus to talk about anything, and now here he was smiling and laughing with bright eyes. James could almost cry with happiness, but then again, he had done enough crying for the day, so he opted to listen and to commit every little detail to memory, to heart. Sometimes, during the course of their conversation Regulus would get a slightly sad look in his eye and he’d appear as if he were about to say something, but he never did.

Jams basked in the feeling of blending into the crowd in Amsterdam. He was at a little café with his boyfriend, drinking tea and laughing together alongside strangers doing the same thing. Sure things were hard, but James wouldn’t trade this moment for the entire world. This moment right here was the world as far as he was concerned.

When they eventually made their way to the cool, air conditioned hotel room, Regulus locked every latch on the heavy hotel door after it thudded closed behind them and James took a look around. Their bags had already been brought up, the bed was large with billowing white sheets and pillows, and the moon was shining through the slants in the windows. They were together in Amsterdam, they had millions of dollars worth of fine art in their hands, and they were unstoppable. James only had one thing on his mind, and that one thing was getting his boyfriend into bed.

He spun around, pulling Regulus in by his waist, and began his gentle advance. His lips attached themselves to Regulus' immediately and he smiled as Regulus sighed into the kiss. James let his hands shamelessly wander all over Regulus' body. His fingers worked down the buttons of his shirt, and caressed the expanse of his back and he let out a sharp groan when Regulus worked his fingers through James' hair, pulling at the roots.

This was nice. James' eyes fluttered closed. Regulus began kissing along his jaw and down his neck. Now, James didn't have to think about his mum or traitors amongst them or what happened or what was going to happen or even what could happen. When he was with Regulus, there was just Regulus.

James let his hands wander lower and lower and Regulus let out a noise caught between a huff and laugh as James shamelessly palmed his arse, pulling their bodies closer together, and then when he could stand it no longer, he picked Regulus up, and spun him around. He beamed at the way Regulus laughed in surprise, tilting his head back as his curls fell away from his face and he wrapped his legs tightly around James' waist. He planted sloppy kisses all down Regulus' throat before he flung him down on the bed, letting the white sheets envelop him.

Regulus fumbled with his trousers and James took a step back, just for a moment, just to get a good look at him. His brown curls framed his face, his lips pink and swollen, and his chest rose and fell rapidly with every breath. Maybe it was the light, or the look in his eye but he was otherworldly. He was divine.

"James, stop looking at me like that," Regulus whispered.

The words took a moment to register in James' mind. "Angel. You're an angel," James breathed out in momentary awe.

The little gasp that left Regulus' lips was all James needed to be on him again in an instant. He began kissing in a straight line down Regulus' body, starting with his lips and then moving agonisingly slow down his neck, under his chin, in between his collar bones, down, down, down. Regulus' fingers twisted in his hair, little whimpers leaving his mouth as he squirmed.

"I love you so much," James mumbled nonsensically against his skin. "So fucking much."

He was taking his time, basking in every nanosecond. Down between his lungs, closer to his navel, James let his lips explore the hollows and the dips and curves. "I love you."

"James," Regulus murmured, but this time it sounded different. It wasn't breathy, it was strangled and raw and James stopped what he was doing instantly to look up at him. "James," Regulus repeated. He could see that he was crying. They weren't great wallowing tears or sobs that wracked his body, they were small, and they leaked out the side of his eyes and down his face with that silent pain Regulus had known for so long.

"Reg," James pulled back quickly. "Hey, what's wrong?"

Regulus covered his face with his hands and rolled over so that he was face down on the bed. “I’m sorry,” he sniffed. It came out muffled into the sheets. “I’ll be okay in a minute James, I’m so sorry. I do want to do this with you, I do, I just,” he paused for a moment. “I’m so selfish. I’m sorry.”

James blinked in momentary surprise. “No,” he cooed softly. “No, no. Don’t apologise, Regulus, it’s fine. You don’t have anything to apologise for. There’s nothing to be sorry for.” He climbed into bed softly next to him, and then as delicately as he could, he pulled Regulus to his chest and held him.

Pliantly, Regulus rolled over on his side and buried his face in James’ chest. James held him tightly, tracing soothing circles on his back and along the sides of his arms, until Regulus was breathing in slow and steady breaths.

“I’m sorry I’m fucking everything up,” Regulus sighed at last. “And I’m sorry I’m too selfish to stop.”

“You haven’t fucked anything up, Reg,” James felt his heart snag. “You haven’t. The heist was successful. Everyone is here, and alive, and safe. You haven’t fucked anything up.”

Regulus let out a frustrated groan. “But I have! I have though,” he pulled away, out of James’ grasp. “Because I fucked you up. Because you got shot, and I know you’re fine but you might not have been. Because you’re a good person, you’re the best person I’ve ever known and now you’re not so sure of yourself. Because you can’t see your fucking mum. Because I ruined that. I ruined all of that,” Regulus was sitting up now, and he had his knees drawn into his chest as he hugged them tightly. “Because I’m selfish, and Frank was right. He was right. I ruin things and I ruin people, James and I love you so, *so* much, but Frank was right. I’m not going to let you go, even though I know it would be better for you, even though I know I’m ruining you, I won’t do it. I can’t let you go. I’m too selfish. I watched what I ruined today when you were in the phone booth and then I fucking sat across from you and drank tea with you like-like I didn’t ruin anything. And I let you kiss me and love me because I’m selfish. Even now, you just called your mum and know that was hard, and I know that you’re hurting, and I’m the one fucking crying.”

Regulus wasn’t looking at him, he was staring straight at the wall as he tried to keep himself together. As he tried to keep himself from shattering. James wasn’t going to let him shatter. Every word that he spoke broke James’ heart.

“I don’t want you to let me go, Regulus. Frank was wrong. He was wrong about you. Because you haven’t ruined me. Listen, you make me laugh more than anyone ever has, and you make me smile to myself all day long just by thinking about you. You make me excited to wake up every morning simply by existing. You brought bright colour back to my life, you brought love. Love that I didn’t even know was out there for me, love in such a magnitude, I wasn’t sure it was possible. You came in with your art and your books and all your knowledge and you made me want to learn, you made me ask questions, and you showed me the beauty in the tiniest and most mundane aspects of life. The beauty of car rides, and making tea for someone you love, and nervous glances, and washing dishes, and oil paint. Because we did it together. You did that. You didn’t fuck up my life Regulus Black, you made it so much better. My mum, that’s something we can work through, okay? Together.

You're a genius, and we can figure it out together, in time." James was talking rapidly. He wasn't thinking about what he was saying or even if it was making sense, he was speaking everything that he was feeling, with no filter. "I love you and I'm not going anywhere. And I would never want to do any of this without you, because it wouldn't make me better off; *you* make me better off. So Frank can go fuck himself. Because I'm selfish too when it comes to you and I'm never fucking letting you go either."

Regulus was quiet as he continued to stare at the wall. *Don't shatter. Don't shatter. Don't shatter.* James counted every beat of his heart.

"I don't want to alarm you, but this is normally the part where you say, like, fuck Frank or something," James added nervously.

The corner of Regulus' mouth upturned just slightly at James' words, but when he still didn't say anything, James let out a sigh.

"Okay look. You can think that what Frank said was right. And you can think that you ruin people, or whatever, but then that would make you a deeply, deeply flawed person, Regulus Black. And I don't know if you know this, but I'm kind of fucking perfect, and I'll let you in on a little secret. A perfect person like me, would never date such a deeply flawed individual. Perfect people like me only date other perfect people. So, you can think Frank is right, but fundamentally that is scientifically incorrect because then we wouldn't be dating. The very nature of our relationship disproves all of Frank's statements."

"James," Regulus finally turned to look at him and James felt his heart soar. "What the fuck are you even talking about right now?"

"You're smiling again. Oh, you know how I love when you smile," James grinned, kissing Regulus' cheek.

"Maybe we're not perfect people. Maybe we're both fucked up. Maybe you're just way better at hiding it than me," Regulus shook his head, his frown settling back on his face.

"Hm, well then I was fucked up before I met you and you had nothing to do with it."

"Well, what if-"

"Regulus, will you just shut up and let me love you? Don't let Frank win, don't go hiding back into yourself, don't let all of this be for nothing. Just let me love you," James implored, grabbing both of his hands. "Let me love you."

Regulus pressed his lips together tightly. He had stopped crying and James felt a little relief. He could celebrate the small victories.

"Okay," Regulus whispered quietly after a minute.

"Okay?"

"Okay," Regulus nodded. "I'll try. Everything is new and hard for me, but I'll try. I'm trying."

“That’s all I can ask for,” James smiled softly as he kissed him on the cheek again. Regulus always had this habit of leaning in when James kissed him. Like James had this power to pull him in or like Regulus just wanted to feel as much of him as possible, but it took James’ breath away every single time.

Gently, James tucked some of Regulus’ curls behind his ears and again Regulus leaned into his touch. “Is this who we are now,” Regulus shook his head, but his voice was lighter.

“What do you mean,” James asked, admiring every small detail of Regulus.

“The kind of people who cry all the time,” Regulus sighed, falling back into the bed on his back. James quickly mirrored his position so that he was laying next to him, staring up at the hotel ceiling with his hands behind his head.

“It’s good to cry, Regulus. It’s what regular, emoting people do sometimes.”

Regulus reached out and swatted James’ chest lightly.

“I never used to cry this much. But then I met you and I just had all these feelings and nowhere to put them they just sort of…leak out of my eyes sometimes,” Regulus explained, in a slightly abashed tone.

James made a humming sound deep and low in his chest and Regulus moved so he could rest his head there, so that his cheek rested on his lungs and he could feel the rise and fall of every breath. He absentmindedly grabbed Regulus’ hand and began twisting the rings on his fingers. He loved them all: his big heavy silver band that had apparently been in his family for ages, his snake ring with the emerald eyes that wrapped around his slender finger, his blocky one with abstract design on it. They stayed this way for a while each with their own thoughts.

“When I find the mole,” Regulus spoke into the silence. “I swear to God I’m–”

“No murder, Regulus,” James cut in firmly. He already felt sick at the mention of the word mole. He wanted to bury himself under the sheets with Regulus and hide from the world. He couldn’t entertain the thought that someone who he’d been living with, who he’d spent everyday with, had turned on them. He didn’t want to think about it, but he knew it was all Regulus wanted to think about.

“Burying someone alive isn’t murder, technically,” Regulus mused softly.

“Yes, it is,” James responded flatly in a tone that indicated he didn’t want to even slightly joke about this.

“If they told the police, why were they on the road, why weren’t they at the museum? That would’ve ruined the whole operation. I don’t understand. Unless they didn’t want the police to ruin the whole operation, but then, why tell them anything at all?”

James ran his fingers through Regulus’ hair as he listened to him think out loud.

“Or maybe they wanted to stop us with all the paintings. So they could see everything we would’ve taken. But then why not tell the police where we were selling them? Then they could prove intent to sell and distribute.”

“Reg, do we have to do this tonight,” James asked, feeling exhausted. There had been enough turmoil, and he wanted to pretend that his friends were all loyal for one more day. “Can we order room service and watch a movie or something?”

“We have to do it before we meet with Avery. I won’t go in there not knowing who told the police James. I won’t put everyone else in danger by taking a mole to an art swap,” Regulus answered sternly, but when he looked up at James, his stern expression faded instantly and he reached up to trace his fingers along James’ jaw. “Yes, okay. Yes. You call room service,” Regulus leaned up to kiss him. “Yes.”

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The next day, or merely a few hours later, James woke up to Regulus rolling out of bed and shuffling around the room.

“No,” he whined at the lack of warmth next to him. “Don’t go. Stay here with me,” he was mumbling through sleepy haze with his eyes still closed.

He felt a pair of lips kiss him firmly between the shoulder blades. “I’m meeting Sirius downstairs we’re going to the warehouse to do some evaluations. I’ll be back soon.”

James heard him wander around the room for a few minutes more, before he heard the door close, and everything went quiet again. He rolled over to the spot that was still warm from where Regulus had just been and drifted back off to sleep.

When he awoke the second time, it was to a very loud Marlene Mckinnon banging on his door. “I know you hear me, get up right now. We’re all waiting for you! You’re holding us all up,” she was pounding her fist so hard the door was shaking.

With a start, James realised that he had overslept. He cursed to himself, rummaging through clothes and opened the door as he finished pulling his shirt over his head.

“We’re in Sirius’ room,” Marlene flashed a grin at him when he opened the door. “They ordered breakfast up and they’re about to talk to us about the,” Marlene looked around to see if anyone was listening, “the profits.” She had finished the last part with a whisper.

“Okay,” James nodded, fumbling to put his glasses on. “Give me like five minutes please and I’ll be there.”

“I’ve only been standing out here for fifteen but sure. Make it twenty. I don’t have anything to do with my day,” Marlene rolled her eyes, but she was still smiling.

It’s not Marlene. It couldn’t be.

Upon entering Sirius’ hotel room a few minutes later, James found it teeming with life. It was a tiny room and all around him, his friends were passing out orange juice and muffins and

fruit while laughing and chattering away.

“James,” Dorcas waved him over. “I saved you a banana,” she tossed it to him with a grin.

“Thank you,” he grinned, immediately peeling it. The warm smell of coffee flooded the little room.

Dorcas and Marlene were perched on the window ledge and James took a seat next to them. Regulus and Sirius were sitting on the bed side by side and everyone else was scattered about, standing against the walls or sitting on the floor.

James looked at Barty and then at Remus and he could tell they were all thinking about the mole. It stifled the mood, it gave a sharp undercurrent of mistrust and suspicion that made James’ chest ache.

“After careful evaluation this morning, I placed some phone calls to some people, I negotiated prices, and discussed paintings and I have come to the conclusion that collectively, we made 987.3 million dollars. This is 14 million more than the practice heist and equates to 89.8 million dollars each,” Regulus spoke when everyone fell silent.

“Holy fucking shit babe,” Marlene turned to Dorcas with wide eyes. “And we’re like together, like we have to be the richest lesbians in the world now right? Because 89.8 million times two is…” Marlene looked up trying to do the calculations. “So much fucking money,” she finished, abandoning the math quickly. “That’s got to be a record.”

Evan and Barty were both looking around the room, gauging everyone else’s reactions carefully.

“My job is to get the right paintings, to set up the location, and the time, and the agreed upon price,” Regulus continued once everyone settled down. He looked calm and calculated, with a sharp jaw and messy curls and James would smile at him every time he glanced over, feeling lucky to call him his. “Your jobs are to brush up on what we discussed in class. Sirius, Barty, and Evan will be with me. Evan will be by the door, Barty will need both hands free… just in case. I’m the one talking. Peter will be in the car on standby, Marlene will drive one of the cars, Dorcas will drive the other. James, you’ll help Sirius with the paintings so you’ll also be coming inside. Mary, Lily, and Remus will be an extra set of hands. I need you three to be versatile and adaptable. If Peter needs help bandaging, you bandage. If Sirius needs help carrying in a painting, you carry. If I need more manpower, you shoot.”

Both girls nodded quietly and Remus gave a small salute. James felt the uncertainty creep into his bones. If what Regulus had said was true, then someone wouldn’t be doing their assigned job. Someone might try and sabotage everything, and he had no doubt in Regulus’ word. He also figured that the people he wanted inside with him, the people he wanted to meet Avery and his men face-to-face, were the same people he called to the front of the aeroplane. What if Mary and Lily didn’t shoot? What if Peter didn’t bandage? What if Dorcas didn’t drive? These thoughts sent a cold chill down James' spine. Of course they would shoot and bandage and drive. These were his friends. Peter had already bandaged him once, and Dorcas would never betray anyone, let alone Marlene. Mary and Lily were too goal-driven and amicable to be pulled away by police.

James shook his head quickly, desperately trying to clear these thoughts. He had the sudden urge to shout, to tell everyone in the room that there was a possible traitor amongst them, or to ask for their collective brainpower in figuring out how the police could find them without there being a traitor at all.

He sat and listened to Regulus talk some more, just watching him. He studied his curls and the way his rings glinted in light. He stared at his long eyelashes when he blinked and the way he would roll his eyes at Barty's outbursts. So really, James wasn't listening at all, he just watched Regulus. He left deducing the traitor for the others to figure out.

When the meeting was over and everyone began dispersing, James was surprised when Regulus practically dragged him down the hall and back into their hotel room.

"Regulus," James half gasped and laughed as Regulus attached his lips to James' jaw and began kissing down his neck. His hands were frantically pulling at his shirt in a desperate attempt to yank it off. "Wait, wait," James held Regulus back by the shoulders for a minute to get a good look at him. "Are you good? I-is this good?"

"Yes," Regulus nodded emphatically. "I was there talking to everybody and all I could think about was you and your eyes on me, watching me. Like the way you were just staring at me, James, you can never do that again," Regulus leaned back in greedily for another kiss.

"I was just looking at you," James chuckled. "Just admiring."

Regulus pulled him close again, kissing him deeply. James would never get used to this. He could spend a lifetime doing this.

"So, is this how we're going to spend today," James asked, pulling away breathlessly. He was already fumbling with the buttons on Regulus' shirt.

"I mean," Regulus began in a seductive voice, palming him lightly through the fabric of his trousers. James let his head roll back slightly. "If you want to see the city," he licked the shell of James' ear lightly and James' gasped shamelessly. "Then we can go do that. But I, for one, am with my hot boyfriend, who I would very much like to have sex with. And then I would like to order room service and have more sex, all over the place, and all day."

"Yeah," James answered but it came out as more of a moan, he was shamelessly bucking his hips up into Regulus' hand, trying to get more. More of him, more of his touch, more of anything. "That's perfect. I like that idea."

"Hm, I thought you would," Regulus smiled, pulling his hand away to drag them both to the bed.

Several hours later, when James was too blissed out to move and every nerve ending in his body felt like a live wire, Regulus turned to him, glowing and bright. He ran his fingers along James' chest and not only did James shudder, but he actually whimpered.

"What's your favourite flower," Regulus asked, whispering quietly.

“What?” James wasn’t even entirely sure he was speaking. He was just happy, too indescribably happy to care about anything other than Regulus.

“Your favourite flower,” he repeated with a lazy smile.

“Love, how can you even speak right now? Let alone about flowers? Are my skills that subpar?”

“No,” Regulus let out a little laugh. “No, your skills are not subpar James Potter. They are so, so not subpar, they are way above par,” Regulus felt around for his hand before bringing it to his lips, kissing James’ knuckles lightly.

He felt his heart swell in his chest and he was already too lightheaded without Regulus’ words to begin with, so he closed his eyes for a moment, unable to formulate any thoughts.

“I like sunflowers,” James managed to say after a while. “Did you know they tilt themselves up towards the sun? Remus told me that once.”

Regulus let out a little laugh that turned deeper, and before James knew it, he was laughing loudly, with his dimples popping out and his eyes screwed shut.

“Reg,” James nudged him, also laughing. Regulus’ joy was contagious. “Why is that so funny?”

“Of course you would like sunflowers. I don’t even know why I asked,” Regulus shook his head, still smiling.

“Is that bad,” James asked, suddenly feeling slightly self-conscious.

“No,” Regulus sighed. “No, it’s perfect. You’re perfect.”

The rest of the day bled into night and James had no concept of time as the sun rose and sank in the sky. It was just him and Regulus, and eventually, he fell into a deep and heavy sleep that was free from dreams as he held tightly onto his star.

A few hours later, a bony elbow jabbed into his rib and woke him up. Another jab followed quickly after.

“James, get up. Wake up,” Regulus whispered next to him.

“I’m up, I’m awake. What’s wrong?” He started in a panic. Their hotel room was still pitch black so James knew it was the middle of the night.

Regulus was already out of bed, turning on a lamp and looking for clothes as he moved about the room.

“Nothing’s wrong. Well it’s sort of wrong. Look, get up. Get dressed,” Regulus made a hurrying motion with his hands. “I need to get Barty and Evan and Sirius up.”

“What time is it,” James asked again, getting up with a sigh as he attempted to blink his bleariness away.

“A little past one in the morning. Come on,” Regulus was trying to fix his hair quickly.

“What can I do to help? I can get Barty and Evan up. What are their room numbers?”

Regulus turned to look at him, pursing his lips slightly. “Oh, I can get them. Just get ready and meet me down in the lobby. I’ll explain everything once we get to the restaurant.”

“The restaurant,” James echoed. “No place is open this late.”

“I know a place,” Regulus answered definitively, already halfway out the door.

“Of course you do,” James shook his head, still feeling anxious about the impending news. Whatever the news was, it couldn’t wait until morning and needed to be explained away from the entire group. It had to be about the traitor.

James tried not to read too much into the fact that while he was in a sex induced, euphoric, sleep, Regulus was thinking about the heist and traitors and not about how amazing their day had been. Well, maybe he had done both. If anyone could multitask, it was Regulus.

Once everyone was down in the lobby, looking tired and disgruntled, Regulus handed the keys to Sirius and they all piled in the car. James couldn’t help the adoring smile that overcame his features. Regulus Black could pilot a plane and plan a heist but he drew the line at driving in Amsterdam.

“This better be good,” Sirius grumbled as Regulus gave him directions from the passenger seat on where to go. “You nearly gave Remus a heart attack and I have no idea what I’m going to tell him when I get back.”

Regulus didn’t answer. James was desperately trying to keep awake in the backseat and neither Barty or Evan seemed particularly keen to talk.

“Pull in here,” Regulus pointed and Sirius turned.

The restaurant, if you could even call it that, was tiny and inauspicious. There was no sign or name above or on the door, only a dark red awning that distinguished it from the next building over. James slid into the booth in the back of the little restaurant and leaned one side of his body up against the wall which was also painted a deep red. It was late now, nearing two in the morning and they were the only ones there. The entire place was run down, lit in low, hazy yellow lights, and the booth cushions were ripped, exposing the yellowing foam underneath. The time change coupled with James’ recent spontaneous sleeping habits had muddied his brain and he felt disoriented beyond belief.

Barty and Evan took a seat across the table from him and Regulus took a seat next to him. All three of them seemed completely unaffected by the late hour and little sleep, though Regulus’ natural state was looking slightly deprived. James smiled to himself affectionately. Sirius had grabbed a creaky wooden chair from the next table over and plopped himself down at the end

of the booth. He also looked exhausted, which James could appreciate considering he was in the same boat.

A tall, stout man with a dark beard and suspicious eyes approached the table and spoke with a heavy Russian accent. James let Regulus do all the talking which he regretted almost instantly when the man returned with water for all of them and black coffee in large, chipped ceramic mugs. James stared at it and frowned at the bitter smell, an expression that was mirrored by both Barty and Evan.

“I can ask for cream and sugar if you want,” Regulus said raising an eyebrow.

James looked around for the waiter but it seemed he had disappeared behind the heavy metal door that led to the kitchen. It was clear that he was the only one working. Sirius was already drinking greedily from his cup.

“No don’t worry about it,” Barty grumbled, taking a sip and wincing.

“So,” Evan drummed his fingers against the table. “Care to explain why you called this meeting?”

Regulus blinked slowly at him. “I know who informed the police.”

The sentence landed like a heavy blow to James’ stomach and everyone sat up a little straighter. James felt his mouth go dry and a jolt of adrenaline flood his veins. He was certain that everyone was holding their breaths, waiting desperately for Regulus to speak.

“What I don’t know is why they did it, or how. So I need us all to think critically about this,” Regulus continued. “Before I call them, I want clarity. I don’t like surprises. I don’t like not having the upperhand.”

“Who was it, Regulus. Jesus fuck,” Barty cut in, looking at him with round, wide eyes.

James felt his stomach flip in fear as a cold frost began to spread throughout his bones. Whatever Regulus said, whoever’s name came out of his mouth would practically be issued a death sentence. James had managed to talk Regulus out of murder, but he was aware that there could be worse fates.

Regulus’ eyes flashed to Barty cooly before he turned his full attention to Sirius who was watching Regulus with rapt attention. “Lucius,” he nodded slowly. “Malfoy.”

“That rat-faced fucking motherfucker,” Sirius’ eyes flashed in immediate anger. He practically lurched forward out of his seat, the coffee from his mug sloshed out and onto the table.

“No,” Evan shook his head. “No. Because you’re working for him. You picked up that piece, that one of the ugly lady with devil-horned hair for him. He’s your family.”

Regulus pursed his lips tightly. “That's Jan Van Eyck. It’s called the Portrait of Margaret Van Eyck. It was his wife.”

James was grappling with the waves of relief that were washing over him. *Not Dorcas. Not Marlene. Not Mary. Not Lily. Not Peter. Not Remus. Lucius.* Lucius, he could live with. Lucius, he could understand. He knew his friends would never do this.

“He painted a portrait of his wife? That’s sweet,” James heard himself say.

Evan narrowed his eyes across the table at him. But it was sweet. An artist was doing what he was best at, using his talents to commemorate his wife, to paint her with devotion and care, so that hundreds of years later total strangers could admire her just as he had. It was sweet.

“Well, she wasn’t that great to look at,” Barty scoffed. “What’s-his-face could’ve made her forehead smaller, for starters. Take some creative liberties.”

“No,” Regulus cut in, frowning. “Just because she doesn’t fit today’s modern standards of beauty doesn’t mean she isn’t beautiful. She put on all her best clothes and dressed up nice. I’m sure she felt beautiful sitting for her portrait and she wouldn’t appreciate you, *Bartemius* , inserting your opinion on–,” Regulus interrupted himself with a wave of his hand. “This is not the fucking point. We’re not doing this right now, actually. We need to stay on topic.”

“Regulus, at the risk of invoking whatever rage you have, I think you’re wrong,” Evan stated calmly. “He actively benefits from this heist being complete. He’s been in the same industry, the same circles of people as you for longer than you have. He’s never once called the police on anyone. You know as well as I do that he likes to handle all his business in house.”

“He was there at the auction,” James supplied. “He saw Regulus there, and everyone on the team actively benefits from the heist. So that’s not a good argument to rule out Lucius, unless it’s being used to rule out everyone else.”

“Lucius was at the auction. Listen, whoever it was knew. They knew I would be driving a car and they knew that,” Regulus took a deep breath in. “They knew that James wouldn’t be with me. Nobody here knew who was riding in what car except for me. Lucius… he knows things about my past relationships with people. He’s used my relationships against me before for personal gain and he knows how I like to distance myself from the people that I love. He has a vast knowledge of the heist world, he was close to my father, Orion. He saw James at the auction. He saw him and he could see right through me, even then. He could’ve been the one to inform the police about places to look into, names of pertinent people, all kinds of things.”

Sirius was shaking his head, his lip curled in disgust. James was more than willing to accept that the traitor was Lucius. If he was being honest with himself, he didn’t much care about the how or the why either.

“Regulus, you have to be right about this, because if you’re not and you accuse him,” Barty shook his head, not bothering to finish the sentence.

“I know, but I think I am right. Think about it. We’re a part of the same world, my people are his people. It’s possible that my father told him more than he let on. I mean Avery probably told him we were here in Amsterdam already.”

Sirius was nodding. “But then, why call the police? He could have done it, possibly, but what does he gain?”

They were all quiet for a while, thinking about it. James could hear the gears turning in everyone’s head and he felt glaringly out of place. He didn’t know Lucius or the world Regulus was a part of or any of that. He couldn’t possibly begin to think of motives or provide insights like the rest of them could.

“Are you going to drink that,” Sirius asked, nodding to James’ coffee cup.

Instead of answering, James just slid the mug down towards him.

“I think I have to call him,” Regulus said at last.

James wasn’t entirely sure why this was such a big deal but he could tell by everyone else's tone and demeanour that it was dangerous. From what he knew of Lucius, James could say that he was a rotten person, but just how dangerous he could be was still unbeknownst to him.

“Regulus,” Sirius said carefully. “If you’re wrong–"

“Then I’m wrong and we’ll worry about that when we get there,” Regulus snapped, pulling a phone out of his pocket.

“It’s late. What if he doesn’t pick up,” Evan asked as Regulus began punching in the numbers.

“Oh, he’ll answer.”

James looked around for the waiter, but he was nowhere to be seen. He didn’t think that this was the kind of conversation that should take place in public.

“Regulus told him to wait in the back,” Sirius said, looking at James. “It’s okay, these kinds of things happen here all the time. He won’t care.”

James nodded, feeling his breathing quicken.

As soon as the phone began to ring, Regulus put it on speaker and sat it down in the middle of the table.

“Not a word from anyone,” he breathed sternly, his eyes glued to the lit screen.

Everyone watched the phone in anticipation. Barty was gripping the edge of the table tightly and Sirius was sitting back with his arms crossed and glaring so harshly James could tell he was hoping that Lucius would fall down dead on the other end of the line.

‘There better be a very good reason you are calling me at this hour.’

A smooth and unbothered voice came from the phone. James recognized it instantly from the night of the auction. It was haughty, it was made to sound as if he were above any and everyone else.

Regulus spoke in an equally calm and smooth voice, as if he couldn't be bothered either.

'Lucius. I know it was you who called the police in New York. Care to explain?'

There was a long stretch of silence on the other end of the line and James felt the sharp panic rise in his throat. What if Regulus was wrong? What would happen? He glanced at Barty and Evan and their grim expressions did little to assuage his fears.

'How can you be so sure it was me?'

'Don't insult me.'

Regulus' voice was still deadly calm.

'How many members of your team did you turn on before you figured it out?'

James could practically hear Lucius' smirk through the phone.

'None. Why did you do it?'

More silence, and then Lucius let out a loud sigh.

'I was hoping to tell you this when we met face to face in Copenhagen, but I suppose I'll tell you now. I've recently aligned myself with a new business partner, one who is deeply interested in your talents. But he wasn't convinced by my high praises of you, little Regulus. No, he wanted to put you to the test and since I happen to know a few things, I figured escaping a police chase would be enough to get him on board and impress him with your talents.'

'Lucius. I don't work for anyone, least of all you. You can't solicit me to do jobs for you or anyone else you might have tied yourself to. It still doesn't explain how you found out where we were. I didn't tell you any of that.'

This time James could hear a laugh come from Lucius and some shuffling, as if he was filing through papers.

'You mean to tell me you haven't figured that part out?'

'You knew my father. Perhaps he told you more of his plans then he let on.'

Sirius ran a distressed hand through his hair.

'I knew the night you came to the auction that you were going to hit New York. Your father always wanted to save the best for last. And I knew you couldn't hit the big ones. The MoMA, the MET, the Guggenheim. They're giants, and they invest too much in the security of their

collections. But there's the Braxton, the Wellington, and then the Foundry. My people and I managed to narrow it down to those three.'

'Which is why the police weren't at the museum. Because you didn't know which one we were at.'

Regulus murmured, with eyes wide as he began to put everything together.

'Very good. But I mapped it, you see. And regardless of what museum you went to, there is one road where all the paths merge if you're trying to flee. I couldn't be entirely sure where you were going, but I had a good guess, knowing your father and his routines.'

'And that's where you told the police to meet. On Lawrence road.'

'And you drove right through there.'

It was smug, and James saw Sirius lean forward, his jaw clenched in anger.

'But why risk the police stopping us? Why risk your reward from the heist?'

'Sounds like I have more faith in you than you do, Regulus. If the police stopped you, then I would be out a few paintings, sure. But if you escaped, I'd get a new business partner who values my word and a few paintings. The reward was greater than the risk. I told him you were good and you were. I heard there were no casualties and you managed to escape. The police are combing through all the museums now, I reckon they'll know which one you stole from in a matter of hours. And Avery tells me you're already in Amsterdam. You work quickly.'

Sirius and Regulus shared a knowing look that James couldn't quite decipher, but Lucius seemed to interpret the silence correctly.

'We're family, Regulus. There is nothing you can do that I won't be able to find out. Did you really think you could use Mulciber's storage facilities without my knowledge? Or that Avery wouldn't tell me the second he found out you landed?'

Regulus didn't answer.

'Not to worry though, Tom was very impressed.'

'Who the fuck is Tom?'

Lucius let out a little tut as if Regulus were completely uncomprehending.

'My new business partner. Tom Riddle.'

'Oh and what's he in the business of then? Murder?'

Regulus' tone had taken on an icy quality.

'Not that it's any of your concern, but he is the new world order. You'd do well to fall in line.'

Regulus let out a derisive snort.

'It's late. We'll talk more in Copenhagen. Narcissa requests that you come visit us soon, she misses you terribly. You'll understand though, if I pass along your regrets. Oh, and tell Sirius I said hello.'

Then, the line went dead. The entire table let out a collective sigh.

It was Lucius. It was Lucius. As long as the rest of the heist went to plan, then they would be safe. Their friends were loyal. Lucius had set out a test, and Regulus had passed it. So everything would be okay from here on out. James felt relief spread throughout him with every beat of his heart.

"How the fuck does he know I'm here," Sirius asked, looking at Regulus with cold eyes.

"He doesn't. Not for sure. Or maybe he does. I don't know, maybe he's bluffing. It doesn't matter," Regulus answered shortly.

"Have any of you heard about this Tom Riddle," Evan spoke up, still looking on edge.

Everyone shook their heads.

"I'll find out," Regulus responded firmly. "For now, what's important is that we continue on as normal. I was right, it was Lucius. Any questions?"

"Yeah, only like a million," Barty snorted.

"Any that have to be answered right now," Regulus amended his previous question.

"I guess not," Barty muttered.

"Good, then we're leaving," Regulus sighed, sliding out of the booth and throwing down a few bills to pay for the coffee. "I got what I came here for."

They were all silent on the drive back. James was too tired to think about the implications of what Lucius had said. He doubted he would even be able to understand half of the implications anyway. When they arrived at the hotel, James waited for Regulus to get out of the car, but when he still remained seated in the passenger seat next to Sirius, James walked over to the his side of the car, and Regulus rolled down the window.

"I'm going to stay out here to talk to Sirius about some things real quick. You head on up."

James eyed him sternly, feeling nervous, but he didn't wish to get in the way of whatever brotherly progress was being made. He knew it was important to Regulus to have Sirius in his life like this, so despite his hesitancy, he nodded. He watched as Barty and Evan went into the hotel, unconcerned by the fact that Regulus was staying behind and he felt slightly better.

"Hey," Regulus said softly, leaning out the window to give him a kiss. "I love you."

“I love you,” James smiled, still unable to shake the nervous feeling taking root in his chest.

Slowly, he ambled back up to his room and got ready for bed the second time that night. He listened as long as he could for the sound of Regulus’ footsteps, but eventually, the exhaustive events from the day caught up to him and sleep overtook him.

When he woke the next morning, the first thing he noticed was the absence of Regulus. The bed was cold and James was almost positive that he hadn’t slept in it at all last night. Before any fear or panic could set in though, he saw a vase full of sunflowers sitting on the nightstand with a note. Eagerly, he turned the thick cardstock over in his hand to read Regulus’ neat and precise handwriting on the back.

I’ll be back before the flowers wilt. Don’t worry, I’m off to do something impulsive and brave– you’d be proud I think. See you in a few days.

I love you endlessly,

R.A.B

P.S. Barty and Evan both think they’re in charge but really it’s you and Sirius. Don’t let them do anything stupid.

James read the note over and over again with increasing concern. Given everything they had found out last night, James was worried that Regulus had gone to do something incredibly stupid and dangerous. Visions of him confronting Lucius by himself flooded James’ mind and before he knew it he was banging on Barty’s hotel door.

“James what the fuck,” Evan opened the door, rubbing his eye with the palm of his hand.

“Oh fuck, Evan sorry. I thought this was Barty’s room,” James breathed out, Regulus’ note still in his hand.

“It is.”

“Oh. Well where is he? Actually I can ask you too, assuming you know. Where’s Regulus?”

“Let him in,” Barty’s voice came from the back of the room and Evan stepped aside.

Barty was still in bed, the covers were drawn all the way up to his dark eyes, but he sat up when James came in.

“There’s breakfast leftovers if you want some,” he mumbled, pointing to the table with assorted silver platters on it.

James grabbed an orange and put it in his pocket before he held up the note. Evan had closed the door and leaned against the wall.

“Do either of you want to explain to me where the hell Regulus is right now?” He was shifting nervously back and forth on the balls of his feet.

“Oh, he’s out of town,” Barty answered simply before flopping back down in the bed. “Jesus Potter, I thought someone had died.”

“Regulus left in the middle of the night with no explanation,” James shot back.

“I don’t know, that note in your hand there looks like an explanation to me,” Evan let out a little laugh and Barty snorted.

James didn’t have time for this. He hated the way both of them were being so casually glib about the entire thing.

“Where did he go? How long will he be gone? Has he gone to see Lucius? Did anyone go with him? Are you telling me he just left us in Amsterdam with all of these paintings in the middle of a heist?”

“Woah, slow down there yeah,” Evan shook his head. “Take a seat. Eat your orange. Chill out a bit.”

Barty groaned. “He’s not going to see Lucius. He’s literally fine. Whatever dramatic ass thing he wrote on that note I assure you, he is fine. He’s just settling some stuff he had shipped from the house in New Hampshire.”

“See, I think you’re lying to me,” James squinted his eyes at Barty. “Because why wouldn’t he tell me he was leaving? And why would he describe it as impulsive and brave?”

“He bravely and impulsively decided to leave you pretty boy,” Evan chimed in with a grin. “Oh, don’t look at me like that. It’s a temporary leave of absence.”

“You’re not helping,” Barty called from under the covers. “James, what can we tell you that will make you get the fuck out of here?”

“The truth,” James shot back.

“He went to settle some personal things. It’s a private matter, he can tell you if he wants when he fucking gets back, and he’ll be back in three days. He did not go see Lucius. No one went with him. He’s fucking fine. That’s the truth,” Barty sighed.

“He’s a big boy. He can handle himself, he’s been doing it for years before he met you,” Evan added, but this time it was in a softer tone. “Besides, there are no plans until the swap later this week anyway, so no one will even notice he’s gone.”

“You two are impossible,” James shook his head, already heading for the door.

“Keep your evening free tomorrow Potter! We’re going out,” Barty called as the door shut behind him.

The next stop James made was to Sirius’ hotel room, where Sirius opened the door only partially clothed, and completely unfazed, letting James in without a word.

Remus was still snoring loudly from the bed.

“I take it that this is about Regulus’ absence,” Sirius sighed, tying his hair back with a black band on his wrist.

“You’d be right. Did he say anything to you? Barty and Evan are the least helpful people on the planet,” James grumbled in frustration.

To his surprise, Sirius grinned widely at him. “Oh it’s nothing. He’s fine. You’re fine. It’s all fine.”

“I hate all of you,” James frowned, peeling the orange from his pocket.

“What are you, like codependent or something? It’s not like you live together, you’ll be fine for a few days apart,” Sirius scoffed, sitting on the edge of the bed.

“We’ve been living together before we even started dating,” James deadpanned. “I mean, I shouldn’t feel crazy for being upset that my boyfriend left me in the middle of the night with no explanation and a vase of sunflowers while we’re trying to complete the largest art heist ever documented,” he seethed slightly. Everyone was being way too casual about this for his liking.

Sirius just shrugged, “You’re dating Regulus, what do you expect?”

“Communication?”

Sirius dissolved into barking laughter which prompted a very sleepy Remus to throw a pillow at him.

“Regulus injected me with a paralytic before he communicated shit. Be thankful you got flowers,” Sirius cried, wiping the joyous tears from his eyes.

James let out another noise of frustration.

“Look, get out, go see the city. It’s very beautiful here. Regulus will be back before you know it,” Sirius supplied smuggly, still grinning.

“Are we going to talk about what happened last night,” James asked lowly, giving him a pointed look.

“Regulus and I are taking care of that. Don’t worry about it. If there’s anything important, I’ll let you know, I promise.”

James threw his hands up in exasperation before heading to the door, no better off than he was before.

“Bye James,” Remus mumbled sleepily from the bed.

“Bye Remus love you,” James called out softly, thoroughly annoyed.

James spent the rest of the morning moping about his hotel room, but not before he moved the sunflowers by the window to ensure they got all the sunlight streaming in.

That afternoon, he went bike riding with Marlene. It was nice to get outside and feel the sunlight warm his face. Marlene was reckless and laughing wildly as she wove in and out of crowds and down hills while James tried to keep up. They would race down the streets and attempt daring tricks like jumping curbs, and James was having a wonderful time. He and Marlene both had competitive and lively spirits and they fed off of each other’s energy.

“Also, tell Regulus I said thank you for Paris again. I meant to tell him when I saw it on the schedule and I already wrote him a note, but just tell him again for me, will you?” Marlene flung her arm around James good naturedly as they both walked out of the little sandwich shop they stopped at for lunch. She had made him pay for the both of them because she claimed she was blowing through Regulus’ money too fast.

“What do you mean, thank him for Paris,” James asked, furrowing his eyebrows.

“The two days we’re spending in Paris after this? He’s doing it as a favour to me. He didn’t tell you?” Marlene frowned, turning to him. “I asked him if we could a while ago and he said no, but it’s right there on the schedule.”

“I thought we were stopping in Paris because he used to live in France.”

“No,” Marlene snorted, kicking the kickstand back up on her bike. “We’re going because Regulus is on the side of love,” Marlene sang with a grin. “Even if he’s really *really* good at hiding it.”

“What does that mean, McKinnon?”

“You’ll see soon. Come on I’ll race you back to the hotel. Last one back is a loser and stupid,” she called as she pushed off, already racing through the streets.

James followed quickly after her. He was becoming increasingly more annoyed with Regulus Black and all of his secrets.

The next day, he went with Lily and Peter to the Van Gogh museum, and as much as he tried, he couldn’t get Regulus out of his mind. He was everywhere, even when he was painfully absent.

He listened to Lily explain in intricate detail about the pigment and the technique and the medium of each painting. He listened as she talked about how the frames worked to enhance each portrait or still life. He watched as Peter read all the wall texts and repeated back the important information, and he had a good time, but it wasn’t the same. He kept wondering

what Regulus would say, what details he would point out, what information he would choose to share about the artist. James could see him standing in front of the Almond Blossoms with that look of awe he would reserve for truly great works. He could hear him murmuring in his ear about the real story of the Yellow House while James entertained him with a fake one about an artist collective living there and working for free meals and alcohol.

Lily was great, she discussed the paintings with the same delight and enthusiasm Regulus did, but it was different. She was obsessed with the technicalities, with how the painting was created and put together. Regulus was more obsessed with the why and what it meant.

As they moved through the museum, James couldn't help but compare the paintings he was looking at to the one that he and Sirius had managed to take from the Braxton storage room. Maybe he was biassed, but nothing compared to the portrait of Dr. Gachet that was currently sitting in some storage unit. He smiled at the irony of the situation. He walked in to purchase a ticket to a museum to see Van Gogh's art when days before he had walked into a different museum and just taken a Van Gogh painting right out from under them. He should not be allowed in here, they should all be worried that he was in here, but everyone was going about their business, admiring the art and barely giving him a second thought.

"Oh, this is the one," James nodded, standing in front of a painting full of green grass with pink and white flowers. Trees were jutting up with squiggling strokes for trunks and the outlines of houses could be seen in the background. James looked at the title: Daubigny's Garden.

"This is the one what," Peter asked, coming up to stand behind him.

"This would be Regulus' favourite one I think," James breathed, admiring each little green grass brush stroke. James had already renamed it to Regulus' garden. Except Regulus' garden would have more purple. Regulus loved purple flowers.

"Oh, that's nice," Peter smiled. "Where is he anyway?"

"Oh, you know. Out," James frowned at his clipped tone.

He wasn't sure why he was still acting like Regulus was here. He wasn't sure if he was allowed to say if he was gone or not, so he just opted not to talk about it. This also seemed to be Barty and Sirius' approach to Regulus' absence as well. James didn't know enough to tell anyone anything anyway.

Peter raised his eyebrows curiously, but he didn't push any further.

After the museum, he went back to the hotel and took a nap, alone, in an empty and cold bed. And then he woke up and took a shower, alone, and ordered dinner, alone. He knew he could go out and see what Mary or Dorcas were up to or Sirius and Remus, but he wanted to be upset and complain some more.

"James Potter," Evan's gruff voice came from the other side of the hotel room door. "Open this door immediately."

James rolled his eyes, but turned off the television that was playing at a low volume. He wasn't even watching it anyway.

"Oh good, you're dressed," Barty grinned when James flung the door open. "Put your shoes on we're going out."

"This is a James-napping. We're abducting you since you're all sad and forlorn without Regulus. Come on," Evan grinned, ushering him about the room.

James didn't have the heart to object, and really, it was better than staying in the hotel room all by himself, so he found himself crashing noisily through the lobby with Evan and Barty.

Much to his surprise, Mary was already down there waiting on all of them.

"You're coming with us," James asked, smiling at her.

She nudged his shoulder playfully. "Nice to see you too."

"MacDonald is chill," Evan called as they walked towards the car.

"Yeah she's cool," Barty nodded in confirmation.

"Where are we going," James asked her as they fell in step behind Barty and Evan.

"They didn't tell you? We're going to a coffeeshop. Lily doesn't like it so she's staying behind with Marlene and Dorcas."

"It's a little late for coffee, isn't it?"

"Ah," Mary nodded. "Now I see why they brought you."

James stayed fairly quiet during the car ride while Barty and Evan sang loudly to the radio. Well, the radio was playing french music, and since neither of them spoke French, they were really just screaming nonsense, semi-in tune with the music.

The coffeeshop was lowly lit in deep ambers and wooden browns. James looked at the sign that read 'Dampkring' and upon entering, he knew immediately it wasn't a traditional coffee shop.

"Oh my God," James shook his head, looking around.

"Look, you needed to calm down, Evan and I can make that happen. Also, you are so welcome," Barty grinned, clapping him on the shoulder.

"Aren't we doing such a good job looking after James," Evan asked, turning to Barty with a wide smile.

"Regulus would be so proud," Barty answered affirmatively.

James took a minute to stare at the menu behind the counter. Sativa strains with names like Ceres Hilton, and G13 Amnesia, Indica strains in Bubblegum and Chocolope, and a different category for Hash. He was way out of his element.

“You and Mary grab a seat, Barty and I will do all the heavy lifting. Don’t you worry your little head,” Evan turned to him.

James let Mary lead them to an empty table and he took a seat across from her.

“Coffeeshop,” he nodded in understanding.

“Coffeeshop,” Mary repeated, smiling. “Have you ever been high before?”

“Once,” James answered honestly. “At a party, but I was also drunk, so I think they cancelled each other out. I don’t really remember a lot of it.”

Mary laughed.

Soon enough, Barty took a seat next to James and Evan sat across from him. They got to work quickly passing out pre-rolled joints they had presumably purchased from the front counter. James took a look around at the conglomeration of people all talking quietly and doing the same thing as them.

“Here James, you first,” Barty said, sticking the joint in James’ mouth before he lit the other end. “Now breathe in real deep.”

“I know how to do it, I’m not an idiot,” James grumbled inhaling deeply and then immediately sputtering.

Evan snickered and Mary gave him an amused smile. Barty held out the lighter amicably to everyone else and James tried again to inhale, this time taking it easier.

“Woah,” he breathed out after a few minutes before he began to laugh. He wasn’t entirely sure why he was laughing, it just felt right.

Barty clapped him on the shoulder and nodded with a smile.

“I think it’s working,” Evan grinned.

“It’s definitely working,” James agreed. He felt totally relaxed, like he was dissolving into the seat and he was aware that he was grinning lazily, but he couldn’t stop.

They all talked amicably for a little while. James mostly listened as Mary talked about her brother and how he was in his final year of medical residency and how she was going to use the money to help pay off his debt and buy her own conservation studio. He listened as Barty and Evan complained about the newspapers being solely in Dutch and television stations as well, so they couldn’t decipher anything about what the authorities were saying in regards to the heist.

Barty and Evan were fun to be around. They didn't take anything seriously and it was nice to just be pulled into their antics for a night. They entertained them with all kinds of stories about people they'd met in prison and places they'd been. Mary was wonderful too. She was always more reserved and normally with Lily so James had very few moments to speak with her on a personal level, but her drive and ambition was evident and James had no doubt that she would achieve anything she wanted too. She was someone who knew how to make the most fun out of life, which is why James supposed Barty and Evan liked her so much. They were all similar in that way.

After a while of pleasant conversation, Barty turned to look at him. "You've been awfully quiet James. Are you alright? You're not freaking out or anything are you?"

"Nope," James shook his head and he laughed a little at the weird sensation.

"And you're stoned now?"

"Properly," James nodded and Evan flashed him a grin.

"I'm so proud," Evan laughed. "We did a good thing here, Barty."

"Oh, I agree," Barty nodded. "We're amazing, Now we can get into the real conversation," he looked at Evan conspiratorially. "James, how are things with you and our dear Regulus going?"

"You two are evil, evil people," Mary shook her head, though her eyes shimmered with curiosity.

"What? We're just looking out for him," Evan frowned exaggeratedly. James couldn't tell if they were talking about him or Regulus.

"Well, Regulus is not here right now so it's a bit of a sad situation, really," James spoke easily.

"What do you mean he's not here," Mary asked confusedly. "Like he's not with us at the coffeeshop right now?"

"He's off handling business," Barty shrugged her off with a wave of his hand.

"But you still are like happy and in," Evan coughed. "In love?"

"Okay," Mary cut in again looking at James. "I want it known that any admissions made under the influence are non-binding and made under coercion."

"What are you MacDonald, his lawyer?" Barty scoffed, taking a drink from his water.

Water. When had the water gotten there? James reached out for the cup in front of him and began gulping it down.

"As of right now I am," she nodded firmly.

“Oh we are in love,” James nodded. “I would marry him tomorrow if he asked.” And then James laughed. He laughed because it was true and saying it outloud made him happy and he was too high to care about who he was saying it too.

Evan sputtered and Barty tuned to him, looking as if he’d seen a ghost.

“Don’t you think you should move in together before you say something ridiculous like that,” Barty asked quickly.

“As your attorney, I advise you not to answer that,” Mary looked at James pointedly.

“We already live together as far as I’m concerned. He makes tea,” James shrugged.

“...right,” Evan said, looking lost.

“He makes tea for me like every night from the kitchen,” James clarified, still smiling his lazy smile.

“This better be a sex euphemism I’m not picking up on,” Barty rolled his eyes.

“It’s not. We are just domestic creatures, me and Regulus. We do things that people living together do. We’re living together, basically,” James nodded. His mind was moving rapidly but he still felt slow on the uptake and he felt as if time around him was moving more slowly as well.

“But you’ve only been together in that giant house, with the rest of us living in it. You’d be okay with, say, living alone with Regulus? Like just the two of you,” Barty asked carefully. James was trying desperately to search for some deeper meaning or ulterior motive, but he couldn’t find any.

“That’s the dream, Barty boy. That’s the dream,” James sighed dreamily.

Both Barty and Evan glanced at each other, but James couldn’t tell what it meant.

“You’d do terrible under police questioning, just so you know,” Mary sighed, rolling her eyes.

“Not a funny joke, Mary,” James shook his head in exaggeration. “It’s still way too soon for that.”

She shook her head. “Are you two happy now? He’s stoned out of his mind.”

Barty and Evan just smiled and James smiled with them.

“Hey, so I was thinking, what if there was a way to make portraits move? Like what if when you painted a person, they could, like, move and talk to you from their frames? So I could paint a picture of my mum and when I walked by her painting I could wave and say ‘hello mum’ and she would wave back. Wouldn’t that be cool?” James looked around the table with wide eyes. He had been thinking about this idea for a minute, and now he had to say it outloud while it was at the forefront of his mind, before he forgot again.

“James,” Mary did her best to stifle a laugh. “What are you talking about right now?”

“I’d like a portrait of his mum,” Barty grinned and James scowled at him.

“Just think about it. A living portrait museum,” James made a sweeping motion with his arms.

“Okay pretty boy, I think it’s time for us to get you out of here,” Evan sighed.

Mary nodded in agreement.

“Okay sure, but we should come back,” James said. “This was fun. You two were right.”

“Yeah, we always are,” Barty nodded, getting up from the table. “You’re gonna sleep really well tonight too.”

James let Barty drive as he sat in the backseat in happy contentment, and when he got up to his hotel room, he said goodnight to his sunflowers before he flopped into bed and had one of the best sleeps of his life. The only thing that would’ve made it better, was Regulus.

The next day passed in a similar fashion. He stayed with Dorcas and let her pull him into every little shop and market they could find along the hotel street. He gave opinions about whether or not Marlene would like a specific necklace or shirt or sunglasses and he modelled them all for her. He spent the evening with Peter and Remus and Sirius as they all went out for a few drinks and watched a local band play, and he thought about Regulus. He thought about what Regulus would like and what he wouldn’t like and what he would and wouldn’t do and he had thought so long and so hard about Regulus all day, that he almost wasn’t surprised to see him back in the hotel room waiting for him. It was almost as if James had willed him into coming back with his mind.

“Hi,” Regulus breathed, looking up at James through the curls covering his eyes. He was perched on the edge of the bed.

Even now, even when James was upset with him, the sight of Regulus took his breath away.

“You’re back,” James returned, closing the door behind him.

“Yeah, I got back an hour ago. Where were you?”

“You first,” James shot back.

Instead of answering, Regulus just stood and crossed the room, hugging James tightly. James enveloped him quickly; it was an automatic response. His body knew before his mind did. James rested his cheek on the top of Regulus’ curls and felt them tickle his face.

“The flowers look nice,” Regulus said softly after a minute, still not pulling away.

“I missed you and I love you very much but we’re going to have a fight,” James responded seriously.

“Oh,” Regulus intonated, stepping back and looking at James with an expression that was suddenly unreadable.

“No. Don’t do that either, Regulus. Don’t try to hide away, we just need to talk.” James watched him closely. He took in the little frown and the crease in his forehead that had formed as Regulus brushed the curls out of his face.

“You’re angry with me?”

“How would you feel if I left you in the middle of the night and didn’t tell you where I was going or when I’d be back or what I was doing? And Barty and Evan weren’t helpful either,” James began. He was treading carefully, he didn’t want to scare Regulus, but he still needed to talk about it.

“Oh,” Regulus started, blinking rapidly. “No, I wouldn’t like that very much.”

James gave him a pointed look.

“I wasn’t doing anything dangerous. I was fine, the entire time,” Regulus continued, taking James’ hands in his, earnestly.

“Yeah, but if anyone flirts with dangerous situations, it’s you.”

He let out a small sigh. “I know, I’m sorry. It’s just that I’m new at this,” he gestured between the two of them, still holding James’ hands in his own. “I don’t really know how to do this perfectly, and it’s terrifying. Before I met you I just left like this all the time and,” he paused for a moment, shrugging. “No one really cared where I… this is new to me. I’m sorry,” he repeated. He leaned up kissing James’ jaw and then his chin and then his lips and James felt all his annoyance melt away instantly.

“Don’t be mad at me James, it’s unbearable,” Regulus mumbled against his lips.

“Okay,” James sighed, leaning in to kiss him again. “Okay.”

They stayed this way for a while, James once again was perfectly content.

“Are you going to tell me where you went,” James asked, pulling away breathlessly as Regulus tried unbuttoning his trousers.

He let out a frustrated sigh. “If I promise to tell you in a few weeks can we get back to this?” Regulus attached his lips to James’ neck and sucked harshly.

“Weeks,” James cried, exasperatedly.

“What matters is that I’m here, we’re together, and everything is fine,” Regulus implored, reaching for his trousers once more.

James stopped him by grabbing his wrists and placing them at his sides. “Marlene says thanks for Paris by the way. Do you want to explain that to me? Or is that another secret you want to keep all to yourself?” James’ voice came out a little harsher than he intended.

Regulus stopped his advances, giving up for the moment. “That’s a surprise.”

“A surprise for me?”

“No,” Regulus answered. “She didn’t want anyone to know. So I didn’t say anything. She’s doing a thing and she wanted to do the thing in Paris so can we just leave it at that?”

“Since when are you and Marlene friends,” James asked, narrowing his eyes suspiciously. He didn’t mean to make Regulus frustrated and annoyed, but he was equally frustrated not being told anything.

“We’re not…I’m just helping her out. Jesus, James, you’ll know in two days what the Paris thing is about. Can we just,” Regulus dove forward to pepper his neck with kisses and instinctually, James tilted his head back to give Regulus better access. “Can we just get back to this for now?”

Even though James’ eyes fluttered closed and it took him longer than he should’ve, he shook his head. “No. We can wait until the Paris thing to see if we can continue this,” he took a step back from Regulus, and his magnetic pull, to head towards the bathroom.

“Where are you going,” Regulus asked in a whiny tone.

“To take a cold shower,” James smiled as if he weren’t fighting the urge to pull Regulus into bed, but he still felt like a man scorned, being left in the dark with no answers.

Regulus let out an exasperated groan. “James, you’ll know when you need to know. I won’t leave like that again, I promise. Now, come on.”

“I’m locking the door too, so don’t even think about trying to sneak in here,” James called, closing the door just in time to see Regulus throw himself onto the bed like a toddler having a small fit. “I love you,” he called through the closed door.

He was met with a soft thudding sound that he assumed was a pillow that Regulus had thrown against the bathroom door before a smaller and quieter, “I love you too,” was heard coming from the room. “Secrets for sex is ridiculous James Potter,” Regulus called more loudly and then another pillow thudded against the outside of the bathroom door.

James only laughed as he stepped into the shower, and he laughed louder when he heard the doorknob rattle a few minutes later.

“You are so ridiculous,” James exclaimed in glee.

“You actually locked it?” Regulus’ shocked voice seeped in from the closed door. “Fuck you. What if I needed to pee?”

“You don’t need to pee,” James called smugly.

“I’m going to see Barty,” Regulus called insolently. “See how I told you where I was going? Wasn’t that nice of me?”

“It’s a start,” James grinned to himself and he heard the door close faintly after a few minutes.

He was already in bed, and partially asleep when Regulus crawled in later. James turned over and opened his arms wide as Regulus curled up right next to him. Sometimes, Regulus reminded James of a cat, it was almost uncanny.

“Were you going to tell me that Barty and Evan got you high yesterday or was I just expected to find that out from Bartemius himself,” Regulus murmured sleepily into James’ chest.

“They didn’t get me high. I got myself high. I’m an adult, I knew what I was doing,” James chuckled.

“I’m going to kill them dead.” James could feel Regulus shaking his head. “I leave you all alone for three days.”

James just hummed in acknowledgement.

“So what did you do when I was away? Anything fun,” Regulus asked quietly.

James began recounting all of his adventures, spending the most time on the Van Gogh museum. He described all the paintings in as much detail as he could remember and sighed contentedly when Regulus would supply details and little stories about the works. Before he knew it, they had both fallen fast asleep.

The next morning, everyone was alight with nerves. It was their last day in Amsterdam and they were all in Sirius’ room, listening to Regulus lecture, not for the last time.

“Avery is picking the drop location because we have more men then he does. It’s a show of arrogance on his part. Don’t speak to them, don’t look at them, in fact don’t even move when you see them. They’re all very violent people and they’re easily provoked. I’ll do all the talking,” Regulus looked pointedly at Sirius. “I trust the rest of you know how to read a room.”

Everyone nodded quickly.

“It’s not beneath these people to try and take the paintings without payment, so watch for the signs we discussed. Avery will have a guy there, an appraiser most likely. You’ll know him when you see him, do not under any circumstances let anyone else get close to these paintings. Clear?”

Everyone nodded again.

“Good. We’re all about to make 249 million dollars tonight,” Regulus smiled, but it was tight and thin. James could tell he was nervous.

“All of that is going to be in cash,” Lily asked from where she was sitting, frowning slightly.

“No. About twenty million of it will be, but it’s just a show of good faith. Basically proof that Avery is good for the money. He’ll wire the rest, and Dorcas will have all the accounts that

James created pulled up on her computer to make sure the transfer goes through."

James silently prayed that the accounts he had created were solid. He was confident in his work and in his abilities, but he knew that everything had to be perfect. One flaw and they could lose all that money, one flaw and the authorities could be notified.

"But, banks won't allow transactions that large and this late at night, surely," Mary frowned.

James was about to tell her that there were numerous ways around that when Regulus cut in, answering for him.

"None of these people play by the normal rules," Regulus answered carefully. "They have their ways, and we have ours. It'll go through."

"I'm going to take a bath in all that fucking money," Barty grinned.

"I also wanted to let you know that the authorities are aware that it was The Braxton Museum that was broken into. They are currently reviewing every work in their collection to assess the extent of the damage. Right now, they're not releasing names or possible suspects to the public, which is good. We have more anonymity that way. I can only assume they're doing that to worry us and to make us believe that they know more than they're letting on. Don't let it get to you," Regulus paused to look at James and James gave him a small smile in return. "No one is allowed to purposefully seek out information on the heist. Keep to yourself, try to keep away from watching the news, there will be plenty of time to be distracted by that when the heist is done and we are in countries that have no extradition laws."

Barty and Evan shared a guilty look before they stared at the ground, seeming suddenly very interested in the hotel carpet.

"Okay, if you have any questions you can stick around, but if not, I will see everyone out by the cars at one a.m. sharp. Also, bring your suitcases because we're flying out tonight."

Everyone began dispersing and as Regulus fielded questions from a few people, James flopped down on the floor in a starfish position waiting for him to be done. He wanted to be more nervous about the swap tonight. Barty and Evan certainly seemed a little more on edge, and so did Regulus, but James couldn't help feeling like the worst was already behind them. Now it was just tying up loose ends. He could see the finish line so clearly, he was more excited than nervous, but he tried to contain himself. For Regulus' sake.

The rest of the day passed quickly as James ran around, packing up the hotel room while Regulus, Sirius, Barty, and Evan went to the storage facility. They loaded the majority of the paintings onto the jet they would all be on later that night, and whatever works they were selling to Avery, they placed in the back of the giant vans.

Soon enough, James found himself in some back alley that was grimey and completely unlit. He was already loaded with everything from before. Earpiece, handgun, nervous excitement. It seemed to him that everyone was slightly less nervous as well, excluding Barty, Evan, Regulus, and Sirius. Perhaps the previous success had given them a little more confidence, even though Regulus had warned them against leaning into that feeling.

“Sirius,” Regulus turned to him with wide eyes. Even though his voice was calm, James could tell by his slight frown that he was nervous. “I, um…I–”

“It’s okay, Regulus. I know,” Sirius cut him off softly, placing a hand on his shoulder. “Me too.”

Regulus leaned forward slightly and gave him a quick hug before he pulled away. Sirius seemed just as surprised as James did.

“Okay everyone,” Regulus talked into the headset. “Let’s make history.”

The alley contained a series of doors that led to the back of various establishments. Regulus swung one of the grey, iron doors open and propped it with a doorstop. Barty went in first, followed by Regulus, and Evan stood by the door. Carefully, James and Sirius began moving the paintings in from the van. It only took two trips to get them all set up and laid against one wall of the building.

James could tell they were in a restaurant, a small one, like the one they had met at when they called Lucius. Except this restaurant had dark green walls and oak panelling. They had all come in from the back exit and walked through the small kitchen which was deserted and left in pristine, sparkling condition.

It was deadly quiet.

There were men there too, that James didn’t recognize, already in the restaurant. One of them was drawing all the shades so that nobody would be able to see in the windows from the street. James could make out a thin, wiry man by the front door with a heavy looking firearm by his side. He was standing outside, no doubt keeping watch like Evan was at the back of the restaurant. His figure disappeared as the other man pulled the shade over the door.

James noticed a neat row of stuffed black duffle bags lined up in the middle of the restaurant, resting on the dark tiles. He counted ten.

Another man, head to toe in all black attire and taller than Remus watched James and Sirius carefully as they placed each painting down against the wall and stepped away gingerly.

James stood where Regulus told him to stand. The line of duffle bags served as a divider of sorts. All of the chairs and tables were pushed to the side of the restaurant and James stood with his back to the front door of the restaurant asv he faced the kitchen. Sirius stood not too far beside him, and Regulus and Barty were standing in the font, so close to the duffle bags that their feet were almost touching them. Strangely, James thought they looked entirely too much like body bags for his liking. Avery’s men had lined up on the other side of the duffle bags, staring back at them with their backs to the kitchen.

James tried not to think about the thin, wiry man that was standing right outside. He tried not to think about the fact that he had his back turned to one of Avery’s men, or the fact that it made the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. No one was speaking.

It was evident that the restaurant had been cleared out, no workers or owners in sight. It was used completely for Avery's wishes. A loud voice from the back of the kitchen caused everybody's heads to turn.

"Rosier, whenever you change your mind about what you're doing, you come work for me. I mean it," a deep laugh echoed from the back of the kitchen.

Barty stiffened and Regulus cast him a quick warning glance.

"Well then," a tall man with greasy black hair appeared, bursting in through the kitchen doors. His hair was pulled back tightly into a ponytail and James could see the fat gold rings glitter on his fingers as he gestured wildly with his arms. He was wearing sunglasses even though it was nearly two in the morning. "I suppose Regulus has come back to join the family business after all."

Regulus didn't respond.

There was no doubt in James' mind that this was Avery.

"You sure have a lot of people with you tonight," Avery laughed, but it came out sharp and grating. "Don't worry, I'm not Mulicber. I don't bite," he chomped his teeth together loudly and it took James every ounce of self-restraint not to shiver at the clacking sound it made. "And you even managed to get Sirius back in on the family affair," he continued, finally taking off his sunglasses.

James could tell he was high on something; his pupils were dilated over twice the normal size. He looked down at Avery's white shoes and his stomach flipped when he saw splatters of blood in various stages of drying, staining them.

"Lucius suspected as much."

"Yes, well Lucius has a habit of opening his mouth when he shouldn't," Regulus snapped shortly.

James didn't know what he expected Avery's reaction to be, but it certainly wasn't the boisterous laugh he let out at Regulus' words. "You know," Avery began again, staring sharply at Sirius. "A lesser man would be suspicious. Bringing an ex-INTERPOL agent to a swap like this seems like a set up."

Even though his tone was sickly calm, James could see the slight shift in Barty's demeanour as he gripped the handle of his gun tighter. Instinctively, James did the same.

"Call your man to look at the paintings," Regulus replied flatly, not dignifying the dig with a response. "We have places to be." His tone indicated that he couldn't be more bored with the entire situation, which was a stark contrast to James' wildly beating heart.

Once Avery saw that he wouldn't be getting a rise out of Regulus, or Sirius for that matter, he let out a small disappointed sigh. "Severus, get in here," he barked. His sudden change of tone almost made James jump.

A thin, sickly looking man emerged from the kitchen. He wore a severely uninterested expression and his greasy black hair fell in curtains around his face. Apparently no one washed their hair around here. James did his best to keep his expression neutral despite the immediate disgust that was pooling in his stomach.

James watched carefully as this man, Severus, crossed the dividing line of duffle bags to examine each painting with UV lights and magnifying glasses. He watched as he turned the canvas around, delicately documenting every detail. It was a long process that took several minutes, and no one spoke, they hardly breathed. They just watched Severus perform his job like vultures, waiting to swoop down and descend.

Eventually, Severus gave a sharp nod and Avery expelled a toothy grin. And then, just as quickly as he had entered the tiny restaurant, Severus floated back out through the back doors of the kitchen. It made James nervous that everyone was using the back doors. That's where Remus and Marlene and Mary and everyone else were. And while he knew that Evan knew what he was doing, it still made him nervous to think about all of Avery's men walking past him as he stood out there. Now he understood why Regulus had only brought the paintings Avery wanted to buy to the swap. All of his men would walk past the vans to get inside.

"Well, we brought what you asked for," Regulus spoke into the silent room.

"Yes, you did," Avery nodded to the duffle bags on the floor. "And we brought what you asked for. There's two million in each bag. Think you can manage?"

"We'll manage fine." Regulus' tone was clipped and short. "The rest of it?"

Avery cast a sidelong glance at the paintings up against the wall. James recognised the Apple Tree by Klimt standing up against the wall and felt his heart snag slightly. It was such a beautiful painting, it didn't deserve to be in the hands of a man like this.

Avery nodded to the tall man in all black standing next to him. The man turned his back and began mumbling something in a language James didn't recognise. Perhaps it was German. And then, a minute later, Dorcas' voice came over on the earpiece.

"Got it," she breathed out firmly.

Regulus seemed to wait for a few seconds, and then slowly he leaned forward to pick up one of the bags. Barty followed suit. Avery and his man watched them carefully, looking as if they could snap at any moment.

James moved forward and took two of the bags on one arm and nearly staggered at the weight. Who knew money could weigh this much? Then, as gingerly as he could, he took two more bags and balanced them on his other arm. Sirius had moved to do the same. Between the two of them, they were carrying eight bags and sixteen million dollars.

"And if I have a problem with your product," Avery said, his voice had gone completely sinister and cold. "Where do I find you?" He put his glasses back on over his eyes.

Boldly, Regulus began walking towards the kitchen, Barty, Sirius, and James followed quickly behind him.

“Oh, you won’t have a problem,” Regulus called over his shoulder. They were through the doors of the restaurant, into the stainless steel kitchen. James could smell the sharp scent of cleaning solvents invade his nose. “But if you want to find me, ask Lucius. I hear you two are rather close these days.”

They all filed out into the dripping and grimey alleyway once more, throwing the large black bags into the back of the open vans.

Quickly, Evan closed the door to the back exit but not before James heard Avery’s loud, roaring laugh echo once more.

Chapter End Notes

i hope we’re not too disappointed in who the traitor actually is. i read and thoroughly enjoyed everyone’s theories, but most of you think i am way smarter than i actually am hahaha <333

Chapter 31: Paris

Chapter Summary

So sweet you might get a cavity.

Chapter Notes

Most of this chapter is so cornball and sappy of me to write but what can I say? I'm a Pisces Venus. I know I am publishing this a day after chapter 30, i don't really know what possessed me.

tw: mentions of child abuse towards the end of the chapter

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They were only in Paris for two days and Regulus was determined to make the most of it. Everyone spent the early morning after they had landed moving the paintings to some nondescript storage place, still under the cover of darkness.

Then, with Regulus resuming his rightful position in the driver's seat, he led them all to the hotel to get settled. Everyone dispersed quickly, most of them too tired for words. James didn't have time to say anything either as Regulus took him quickly by the hand and began dragging him along the streets of Paris and around street corners. He seemed lighter somehow and more himself as he pointed at buildings and talked about them excitedly. James was incredibly tired, he wanted to go back up to the hotel room like Remus and Sirius had and he wanted to sleep for a few hours, but it was evident to him that Regulus had other plans. It was worth it to see him so excited.

Regulus pulled him into a tiny little bookshop that was glowing yellow with warm light. It was crammed with novels of assorted colours and sizes and so overflowing that small stacks of books were lined up neatly outside the door, unable to be contained within the shop. The green awning beckoned them in and the little door was propped open as gold script glittered '*Les Livres*' on the glass window.

"Bonjour," Regulus greeted the elderly man sitting behind a small wooden desk. There was a cash register next to him and books that were piled so high on the desk, James could barely see the man.

"Bonjour," the man echoed as Regulus began rifling around through the stacks. He pulled out two old books with worn out spines and thick cream pages. They were both clothbound and

one was a pale blue colour while the other was a dark grey.

James watched as Regulus paid and paused quickly to have a conversation with the man that James couldn't understand. He waited and admired the beautiful lilt in Regulus' voice as he spoke softly.

"What books did you get," James asked as they left the bookstore and continued walking down the street. It was early morning and the sun was bathing everything in the beautiful pale yellow light James loved so much.

"Oh I don't know," Regulus smiled softly admiring the covers in his hands. "I just picked two that I thought looked beautiful and then when I read them it'll be a nice surprise, and I'll always think of Paris. A good memory."

"But what if it's a really horrible book about the anthology of insects or something?"

"Then," Regulus slipped his free hand into James', "I can cut out all the cool pictures of beetles and butterflies and make an art collage."

"Can I help," James asked grinning. He liked the idea of doing arts and crafts with Regulus so immensely that he hoped both books were now anthologies of insects.

"Of course you can," Regulus hummed. "But they're not bug books."

"That you know of…yet."

The next place they stopped at was a restaurant. James once again let Regulus take the lead as a wonderful array of orange juice and coffee was brought out and bowls of fresh berries and flakey, buttery croissants. James was in paradise.

"I know you're not particularly fond of coffee, but I ordered yours with lots of milk so it's not as bitter. You should drink up, we have a long day ahead of us, and you won't be able to sleep anytime soon," Regulus smiled, taking a sip from his own coffee cup.

James complied, waiting for the caffeine to kick in. Maybe it was the milk or the fact that they were in Paris, but the coffee wasn't half bad.

As soon as the Louvre opened at nine in the morning, Regulus was one of the first people in, pulling James along on what he called his whirlwind tour.

"The Mona Lisa is here," James breathed when they stepped into the large and imposing building.

"Ugh," Regulus groaned, pulling him towards a flight of stairs that he was almost taking two at a time.

"Here," he said breathlessly, looking up at a large statue in the centre of the staircase.

It was beautiful. The statue had no arms or head, James suspected because they had been lost to time and erosion, but from the body spouted two large wings and the fabric of the dress

whipped around and protruded out into the space of the museum as if it were made of cloth and not carved from stone.

“Wow,” James studied it with wide eyes.

“Winged Victory. Greek Hellenistic Art,” Regulus replied breathlessly before he turned to James and full on snogged him right in front of it. Cold hands on his face, noses pushed together, no room or need for air.

Before James had time to think, or even properly kiss him back, Regulus was already grabbing his wrist and pulling him through the museum again.

They stopped in front of another sculpture. It was small and hidden off in the corner. James would’ve passed right by it if Regulus hadn’t stopped. A marble woman was reaching up to encircle what appeared to be an angel in her arms. The angel was already holding her tenderly and the artist had captured the moment right before they embraced in a kiss.

“Eros and Psyche,” Regulus nodded. James was still trying to catch his breath. “Eros is like cupid and represents love and Psyche, she’s the soul. It’s an embrace, an entwinement of sex and the soul in visual form. Passion.”

And then, in the same fashion as before, Regulus turned and kissed James again. James wished he could say he was better prepared the second time around, but he wasn’t. He was still completely caught off guard and swept off his feet.

“Neoclassicism. It’s a hell of a thing,” Regulus breathed out once they had broken apart, and they were off again.

They were practically sprinting through the museum, tearing through galleries without even looking at anything at all. Flashes of gilded frames and bright oil paints would catch James’ eye as Regulus continued pulling James through the large rooms with no hesitation. When Regulus would stop, the routine began again. They would look at the painting or sculpture for a few moments and Regulus would give a brief rundown of the facts or a short sentence about the artist and then he would kiss him. Everytime. James was better prepared with each passing artwork.

Francisco de Zurbarán. St. Apollonia.

Georges de La Tour. The Cheat.

Jan Steen. Family Dinner.

After the eighteenth work, and the eighteenth kiss, when James was certain they had run the entire length of the museum twice over, he paused, laughing breathlessly.

“Regulus, what are we doing?”

Regulus’ chest was rising and falling rapidly.

“I’m giving you the highlights of The Louvre. Everything you can’t afford not to see. We have to be quick though because I’m taking you to the Musée D’Orsay after and L’Orangerie and we’re doing this all over again. Plus, I told Marlene we’d be back by four because you have James Potter friend duties to attend to,” Regulus answered with a radiant smile.

“And snogging me in front of every work is because you can’t handle yourself around my magnetic presence I assume?”

“No,” Regulus shook his head, his voice coming out much more soft. “That’s because I’m a ridiculous person, because you make me a ridiculous person and I want you to see me in everything. Everytime you see the Winged Victory or hear Eros and Psyche, I want you to think of me. Every still life you encounter, every Rembrandt work you ever see, I want you to think of me. And when I snog you again, in front of the Mona Lisa, everytime you see that work in movies or books or reproductions I don’t want you to think of da Vinci. I want you to see me. To think of me.”

James leaned in to pull him closer, their foreheads almost touching as Regulus looked up at him, “Regulus, I see you in everything already.”

It only came out as a whisper but Regulus’ little gasp was enough for James to lean forward and kiss him softly.

“Every purple flower, every classical symphony, everytime the sky turns the stormy colour that matches your eyes, every hint of Earl Grey tea, every glittering star in the sky. It’s you. It’s always you.”

Regulus blinked, entirely too stunned to speak. James kissed his forehead.

“Can you take me to the Mona Lisa now? I am ready to be thoroughly snogged again,” he said with a small smile, and Regulus merely nodded, guiding them slowly to the other end of the gallery.

Regulus stayed true to his word and took James everywhere. Giant, sprawling water lily paintings by Monet, Degas’ chalky pastels, Manet’s modernism, Cézanne. Sweeping brush strokes, myriads of colours, dozens of art movements and a million kisses from Regulus Black. Everytime James thought it was impossible to love a person more, Regulus was there, doing something to prove him wrong.

In between the museums, he followed Regulus through parks to look at the birds, and to little coffee stands to refuel, and he ate every delicious thing Regulus ordered from the vendors on the street.

“Is the place where you used to get your orange muffins close to here,” James asked as he walked back to the hotel with Regulus hand in hand, after James’ head was stuffed full of artwork and thoughts about Regulus.

“No,” Regulus shook his head. “Even if it was, I don’t think I would go.”

“Why not,” James asked, frowning slightly.

“Oh, you know,” Regulus shrugged casually. “I just had some I like a lot better. Now I’m afraid the other ones will never compare.”

James was beaming. “I find that hard to believe.”

“I don’t know. The chef who makes them, he has a secret ingredient. I think it’s called love?”

James stopped in the middle of the street and Regulus took a few steps forward before James’ hand pulled him back.

There were no words to describe how crazy Regulus made James. Crazy in the way that every atom in his body was alight in his presence. Crazy in the way that James could nearly choke on the love he felt for him. In the way that James wanted to sweep him up in his arms and never put him down.

“I am going to marry you one day, Regulus Back,” James was smiling so widely that his cheeks began to hurt.

Regulus smiled too, his cheeks tinged pink. “Only if I let you.”

There were a few beats of silence that passed between them and neither of them moved.

“Would you,” James asked, his tone more serious than it was just moments before. “Let me?”

Regulus’ smile dropped and he looked at James with wide eyes.

“Oh God, no. No. This isn’t a proposal, Reg,” James ran a nervous hand through his hair. “I am not proposing. It was just a thought for the future. For the, you know, distant-ish future.”

“Oh,” Regulus sighed, the colour coming back to his complexion. He took a few steps forward and wrapped his arms around James’ waist. “I’d be a fool to say no, James.”

James was fairly certain that his soul, along with the rest of body, had ascended into the sky right then and there and burst into a million little rays of light.

Eventually, Regulus managed to get them back to the hotel with fifteen minutes to spare. It gave James enough time to check on all the financial accounts he had set up to ensure that everything was running smoothly. His eyes poured over the numbers on the laptop screen, already comically large for James’ to quantify in his head. What would he ever do with this much money?

“You’ve got to go see Marlene,” Regulus placed his hands on James’ shoulders, leaning over to kiss his cheek. “I promised her.”

“I still don’t understand how this became a thing,” James grumbled, shutting the laptop with a thud.

“It’s not a thing, and you will find out tonight, so just have some patience,” Regulus sighed.

James rolled his eyes before leaving, wandering down the long silent hallways of the hotel, knocking on the room number Regulus gave him.

Immediately, an arm reached out from the crack in the door and pulled him in by the shirt. Marlene looked absolutely frantic. Her hair was wild, as if she had been caught in a windstorm and her hotel room was littered in various items of clothes. James could also see shopping bags from clothing boutiques full of crumpled garments.

“Okay so,” Marlene started, leading James to a spot on the bed that she had cleared by pushing all the clothes to the floor. James sat. “You know how on your very first date with Regulus, when you went to that museum and you were freaking out, you know how you asked for my help?”

James nodded quickly.

“And I picked out the outfit that was basically so perfect that it was the whole reason you and Regulus are together and in love now or whatever? The brown trousers. You remember?”

James nodded again, attempting to keep up with her rapid tone. He didn’t bother to correct her. The reason they were in love now was not because of the brown trousers. It was because they were fated to be together. James knew that whatever artist had carved him, whatever creator made him, however he came into being, he had been made with Regulus in mind. Now didn’t feel like the right time to let Marlene know that, however, so he stuck with nodding.

“Great. Now I’m asking you to return the favour,” Marlene gave him a frantic smile before she disappeared into the bathroom. James could hear several things clanging around.

“Marlene, I am happy to help but I’m still a little confused. Regulus said you needed me for friend duties,” James called to her through the closed door.

“I do need your help. You’re helping me pick out an outfit that will make Dorcas cry when she sees me in it,” Marlene flung open the door. “This is outfit one.” She spun around.

James opened his mouth to speak again but Marlene held up a finger.

“No. We don’t have a lot of time, so please reserve all comments for the end,” she continued, disappearing behind the door again after she grabbed a skirt from the floor.

“When did you and Regulus get so close,” James asked, attempting to commit the first outfit to memory.

“Oh haven’t you heard,” Marlene swung the door open again, flashing him a grin. “We’re secret lovers on the down low. He’s obsessed with me.”

“Not funny,” James shook his head.

Marlene brushed her blonde hair out of her face and spun around in the second outfit, before she disappeared again.

“Is this for an anniversary dinner or a date or something,” James asked when Marlene came out in outfit number five.

“Or something,” Marlene grinned nervously. “It’s a surprise.”

Eventually, they had cycled through all of Marlene’s options and James provided his opinions with as much tact as he could.

“Okay, thank you James. Bye,” Marlene practically pushed him back out into the hallway. “Love you,” she called through the closed door.

“Love you too McKinnon, good luck with tonight,” James called back. It was clear that she was nervous for whatever it was, and James wished he could reassure her somehow. If he had more information it would be easier.

He was fairly certain it was an anniversary dinner of sorts. Maybe Marlene had wanted reservations at a nice Parisian restaurant and Regulus had helped make that happen. In any case, he was happy to get back to his hotel room where he would sleep through the entire evening. He’d been moving non-stop for nearly two days.

As soon as he walked back into the room he shared with Regulus though, he could tell there were other plans in place. Regulus had laid out clothes for James on the bed and smiled at him as he walked in.

“We’re going out. You should shower,” Regulus nodded to the bathroom. “There won’t be time later.”

“Where are we going?”

“The surprise, James. We’re going to the surprise.”

“And I can’t take a nap first?”

Regulus shot him a sympathetic look. “No, sorry. There’s no time.”

“How do you do it Reg,” James groaned, already heading for the shower.

“Years and years of practise,” Regulus called back.

At this point, James had learned that it was easier to just be pulled along. He wasn’t focused on his surroundings or where they were headed, he was just focused on keeping awake. After

the shower he let Regulus walk them through the streets of Paris. James felt as if his feet didn't even belong to him anymore.

"Okay we're here," Regulus whispered excitedly, looking around.

"Why are we whispering," James asked in an equally quiet tone.

"Shh. Because."

James took a look around. They were in a beautifully green and expansive garden with a fountain in the middle. The water shimmered mesmerizingly and the surrounding architecture seemed to entrench the entire place in a form of magic.

"What is this place?"

Regulus began pulling him behind a large bush overlooking the fountain.

"It's the Medici Fountain. We're in the Luxembourg Gardens," Regulus responded making sure the bushes were fully obscuring James.

"Why are we hiding?"

James had no idea what was going on, but he followed Regulus' lead, crouching down behind the large bushes, letting the leaves obscure them. Then a flash of red hair glinted from the bushes directly across from him for a brief second before it was gone.

"Is that Lily," James asked another question. "Also hiding? Over on the other end of the fountain?"

"Yes," Regulus whispered excitedly. "Yes it is. They'll be here any moment."

James heard footsteps running quickly and he turned to his right to his right to see Sirius and Remus crouching behind the large bush next to them.

Sirius was carrying a large camera and Remus flashed James a thumbs up and a smile when they made eye contact.

"Regulus, what the fuck?"

"Marlene is going to propose to Dorcas. Right here. Any second. Whenever they show up."

James felt the smile bloom on his face before he processed the words. "Regulus. *What the fuck* ?"

"Surprise," Regulus whispered. "Now shhh, here they come!"

James crouched lower watching Marlene and Dorcas walk together, hand in hand, heads close. He was hardly breathing as he felt his own heart beat against his chest.

He smiled to himself seeing Marlene's outfit. She had picked the one they agreed upon and she had managed to tame her hair in the time since he'd left her room.

They were standing so close that James could hear their conversation. He prayed silently that they couldn't see him.

"This place is lovely," Dorcas smiled, looking out at the water.

"Yeah," Marlene let out a little nervous laugh. "I had a friend tell me about this spot."

James nudged Regulus silently with his elbow. He was fighting the urge to jump up and down and dance and shout for joy.

"Listen, Dorcas," Marlene began, and James could hear the waver in her voice. She took a deep breath. "The moment I met you, the second I saw you on that aeroplane, and you peered back at me with those striking brown eyes and soft smile, I felt my entire world stop."

Yes. Yes. Yes , James was cheering her on silently in his mind.

"You are my best friend, my favourite person to talk to, and my gentle guiding voice of wisdom. You are the most enchanting woman I've ever met, and you–you're brilliant. And I love you, indescribably so," Marlene broke into a wide smile. "And I would be so honoured to spend the rest of my life with you."

Dorcas took a step back and placed a hand over her mouth in surprise. "Marlene." Her voice also came out watery and thin from behind her hand and James was positive he could see tears in her eyes.

"You, Dorcas Meadowes, are an extraordinary woman that I had the absolute joy to meet under extraordinary circumstances, so I am asking you," Marlene reached a shaky hand into her pocket and pulled out a ring box. "Will you do me the extraordinary honour of being my wife?"

Marlene was crying now too and when she opened the lid of the velvet ring box the diamond glittered spectacularly in the light.

Dorcas nodded slowly before she spoke. "Yes. Yes. Yes. Marlene. Yes."

The series of events that followed were a blur in James' mind as they all seemed to happen simultaneously.

Marlene picked Dorcas up and spun her around, laughing and kissing her all at one. The rest of them all burst out from behind the bushes screaming and laughing in delight. James remembers trying to hug everyone all at once, trying to wrap his arms around the entire group to envelope them in all the love he felt.

He remembers Marlene screaming, "Let me introduce everyone to my fiancée, Dorcas!" A sentence which was followed by loud cheers and applause.

And then just as soon as it had happened, Regulus had ushered them all into a nice restaurant where they all sat outside and drank wine and laughed brightly.

Dorcas kept showing her ring around to everyone and Lily and Mary ooh-ed and ahh-ed multiple times with wide smiles and happy giggles.

“Thank God she said yes,” Barty flung an arm amicably over James' shoulder from where he was seated next to him. “Imagine how awkward that would be, right.”

James took a long swallow of red wine that Regulus had picked out for him. Apparently, it was supposed to be very fancy, and very delicious.

“Barty,” Regulus shook his head at him.

“What,” Barty asked, shrugging. “I’m just saying. It didn’t actually happen.”

At some point in the night, when they had all had too much wine and far too much bread, Marlene had gotten up from her seat, walked over to stand by Regulus, and gave him a loud kiss on the cheek, leaving behind her bright red lipstick.

Everyone turned to stare at her with wide eyes and conversation at the entire table seemed to stop dead. James broke out into a wide smile and did his best to keep a laugh from bursting out and into the open. Sirius on the other hand, did let his laugh burst out into the open as Regulus put a hand up to his cheek like he had been slapped.

“I am single handedly the happiest person in the entire world,” Marlene addressed everyone with a wide smile, still standing next to Regulus. “And he helped make it happen. So, I don’t know how I could thank you enough, but thank you,” Marlene nodded. And then she leaned down to whisper, “and I’ll pay you back for the ring now that I’m filthy rich.”

Regulus blinked slowly and slid his hand off of his cheek, smearing the red lipstick down the side of his face. “Consider it an engagement present,” he muttered finishing off all the wine in his glass. Silently, James slid him his half-full glass.

Marlene skipped back to her seat and everyone picked back up their conversations quickly, and when no one was looking, James dipped his napkin into his water, and gently began cleaning the side of Regulus’ cheek.

“You bought the engagement ring,” James asked softly and Regulus shrugged.

“We hadn’t made the swaps yet and Marlene didn’t have any money but she had her eye on this ring she saw in an antique store by the museum I had her working at. I knew she was good for the money so I didn’t see anything wrong with an advanced purchase.”

“She had the ring with her all this time?”

“For months,” Regulus was fighting a smile and James kissed the corner of his upturned mouth. “Besides, Marlene and jewellery don’t really mix well together do they? I half expected her to try to steal it. So I figured if I bought it, the chances of her paying *me* back are much higher.”

“You are so fucking amazing,” James breathed out. “You are the biggest sap of them all, and I am so in love with you.”

“Fuck off. I seem to recall you crying earlier today at the proposal.”

“I was really tired,” James defended with mock indignation. And then after a moment he huffed, “I can’t help it.”

“I know,” Regulus hummed, finishing off the wine in James’ glass. “That’s why I waited so long to tell you. I hope the surprise was worth the wait?”

“It was,” James nodded, dizzyingly happy. “It really was.”

Down the table, Marlene and Dorcas looked positively besotted.

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Sirius hated Paris. He hated France, really. Everywhere he turned he half expected to see Walburga’s grim expression staring back at him from restaurant windows or park benches. He could almost feel her boney, rigid fingers clamp down on his wrist, threatening to snap it.

He hated seeing storefronts he recognized, places he was emotionally berated in front of, buildings that contained bad memories like pockets of rotted history. He felt small here. He felt hopeless. The only part that was ever good about France was Regulus. The rest of it could burn for all he cared.

He had actually asked Regulus if he and Remus could skip Paris and head straight to Berlin. There were no swaps in Paris, there was no job for him to do, and he’d prefer to avoid the place altogether.

That’s when Regulus had told him of the planned engagement. He had asked Sirius to reconsider because Marlene would want Remus there, and he even went as far to say that Marlene would want him there as well. And then Regulus asked if Sirius would be the engagement photographer and that was the final nail in the coffin. He agreed to stay.

But he didn’t have to be happy about it.

The first day, he spent the morning in bed asleep with Remus. This was the most preferable option for him. He would much rather stay in the starchy white room all day, and emerge for the proposal and maybe for dinner, and then he would sleep the entire second day away until it was time to leave. At least the hotel was untouched by Walburga, unmarred by Orion. Moony made things better too. Sirius was all too confident that he could spend two days in a hotel bed wrapped around Remus Lupin. In fact, he would be more than happy to do it.

But a few hours later, Remus was up and ready to see the sights. He kept asking Sirius incessant questions about places he would recommend and restaurants he liked to eat at when

he was younger and Sirius didn't have the heart to tell him that the entire city was like chalk to him. Tasteless, bland, dead.

Remus knew a lot about Sirius' life, Remus knew most of Sirius' life at this point. It was a process– revealing things to him in little increments, in smaller digestible doses so that he wouldn't get overwhelmed with Sirius. So that he wouldn't leave. With each thing Sirius revealed, Remus proved himself as dependable and sturdy. He showed that he would stay, and that he cared and he listened. So Remus knew Sirius had lived in France, and he knew Sirius had a horrible childhood, but he didn't know just how entwined the two were. It was harder for Sirius to compartmentalise things. Regulus could always do it much better than he could. He could sift through the memories and sort things into good boxes and bad boxes and keep them locked away, independent of location or time. For Sirius, everything melted together to form a confusing, inseparable blob of memories and emotions that ricocheted wildly from happy to miserable from joy to despair. It was too hard for him to untangle all of that in his mind, so he just stayed in the hotel bed, and when it was evident that he had no intention of going out to see the city with Remus, Remus left to find Peter instead.

"You're photographing the engagement," Remus asked softly once he got back from his excursion with Peter. He was treading carefully, Sirius could tell. Even though he had been exasperated when he left this morning, he seemed much more agreeable now.

Sirius was fiddling with the settings on the camera. He had stayed in the room the entire day, ordering food up and staring sullenly out the window as the afternoon passed him by.

"I'm actually not a half-bad photographer," he smiled to himself.

He became interested in photography when he was younger, and he remembered that one year when Regulus had gotten him a camera for his birthday. It wasn't that expensive, and Regulus had stolen it since he knew Walburga would never allow it, but Sirius loved that camera more than anything. He would take photographs of everything he could and Regulus would often excitedly ask to see them all after Sirius had finished shooting. Regulus said he always liked to see the world through his eyes. Pictures of flowers and mysterious looking couples on the street. Old buildings and laughing babies.

Sirius couldn't believe that Regulus had remembered his love for photography all these years later. He wished he still had that camera. Orion had found it hidden under his bed and in one of his fits of rage, he smashed it up in front of both Sirius and Regulus.

Regulus had cried watching the little camera disintegrate into tiny plastic bits and shards.

He had cried and as punishment, Walburga refused to feed him for two days.

Crying was not something that boys did.

Crying was a sign of weakness.

That was here. That was in France. Before they moved to England.

The engagement was nice, and so was the dinner. It was nice to see Marlene and Dorcas so happy. It was easier for Sirius to put the memories and the feelings on the back burner, and Remus was being considerably lenient and not pressing Sirius for anything. He knew Sirius was in a state, but he also knew that Sirius would speak about it when he was ready. Still, Sirius couldn't help the slight jealousy that prickled in his chest when he thought about how for Marlene and Dorcas, this city would never be chalk, or marred by the past. For them, Paris was light, it was love, it could be seen for all the wonder and beauty it contained.

On the second and last morning of his stay in Paris, Remus went out with James and Mary. Sirius didn't bother asking where they were headed. It would all be the same chalky nothingness anyway. He rolled back over and went to bed.

A few hours later, a knock at the door woke him up. He figured it was Remus who must have forgotten his room key, so he tumbled out of the bed and opened the door blearily.

To his surprise, it was Regulus who was waiting for him, and he pushed past Sirius to enter the room without a word.

"Yeah, come in," Sirius grumbled, tying back his hair so that it stayed out of his eyes.

Regulus took a seat at the end of the bed and regarded Sirius for a moment. It was a heavy gaze that made Sirius want to squirm slightly.

"Thank you," Regulus breathed out, still not breaking eye contact with him.

"For what," Sirius asked, blinking in an attempt to wake up his brain.

"For everything," Regulus replied a little sadly. "But thank you for coming back. To Paris. To here. I know you hate it." He frowned, staring at the floor.

Sirius walked over and sat down next to him with a sigh.

"I just don't understand how you do it, Regulus. How are you here and out there and able to breathe properly? How?"

Even though he wasn't crying, Regulus sniffled softly. "I don't sleep," he said at last, still staring at the floor. "I love it here, but every time I close my eyes, everytime I stop moving enough to drift off, I have these horrible dreams. Mum and dad are more alive here I guess."

"Yeah," Sirius let out a humourless laugh. "Yeah, they are."

"I keep thinking it'll get better. Because there are parks here, Sirius. Parks where you taught me how to whistle and pâtisseries where we ate so many macarons we made ourselves sick," he smiled softly.

"Parks where Walburga pinched us so hard we'd bleed and pâtisseries we'd pass when they refused to feed us," Sirius scoffed bitterly, a chalky taste invaded his mouth.

"Yeah," Regulus nodded softly. "Yeah, that's what the dreams are for. To remember those parts."

Sirius was silent. He didn't quite know what to say. He never did.

"I just keep thinking that there are good memories here too. So many good memories. And I keep trying to make new ones. New ones that will paint over the bad ones. Eventually they have to fade away right? Eventually there has to be so much good here that it doesn't feel like…"

"Chalk," Sirius offered.

"Chalk," he nodded. "Eventually the good outweighs the chalk. It has too."

"James has turned you into a little optimist then, I see," Sirius smiled.

Regulus stiffened slightly, but then relaxed. "Maybe." He bit his bottom lip. "He's really good for me, Sirius."

"Yeah. Yeah, I think so too," Sirius sighed.

"I was born here. We did a lot here. We were brothers here. I'm not letting them take that away from me. They don't get to take that," Regulus said firmly.

Sirius didn't answer. He was too busy trying to swallow the lump that had formed in his throat. There was a time when he and Regulus had been so close that they could almost hear what each other was thinking. They could know how each of them were feeling at any given moment of time. And then everything happened, and Regulus was a stranger. His thoughts, his feelings had become so remote, so inaccessible to Sirius that he'd almost forgotten what being that close to him felt like.

Almost.

But now, now he was starting to remember again. Now, they were trying to start again, and it was working. Sirius knew it was working because he knew exactly how Regulus was feeling right now. He also knew that Regulus knew how he was feeling too.

"Anyway, I just came by to say thanks. Thank you, for being here. And if you find yourself wanting to try, at least, wanting to try to paint over all the bad, or maybe just add a little more good, I'm in the room diagonal from you," Regulus said, getting to his feet and walking quickly towards the door.

Regulus was the only good thing about this city anyway.

"Hey, Regulus," Sirius called softly.

Regulus stopped with one foot in the hallway and the other still in the room. His hand rested on the door handle.

"Would you maybe be free to get a coffee with me?"

Chapter End Notes

this chapter was short! It’s gonna be a little while before i get the next one out! (not too long but longer than a week i think) hope you all are well! xx

Chapter 32: Berlin

Chapter Summary

Art Swap #2: Regulus vs. Rodolphus Lestrange

Chapter Notes

Sorry I made you all wait so long for such a short chapter but I've been getting things in order for my master's program and it's been an experience! who knew attending university overseas would be so difficult??

tw: guns, violence, mentions of knife violence

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I had coffee with Sirius in Paris,” Regulus murmured against James’ bare shoulder. He was running his fingers through his hair gently, sometimes the strands would get caught on his rings, but James never seemed to mind.

“That’s good,” James hummed. It was a low rumble in his chest that made Regulus close his eyes in happiness. James was always so warm, the heat generated off him in soothing waves that warmed Regulus’ cold hands and cold bones. Regulus had never met someone so well suited for him and he was reminded of it everyday in little ways like this.

He had no idea that he was capable of a love like this– that he was capable of being loved like this, but here he was being loved and loving someone else despite it all. James made his heart insatiable. His heart was a red beating dragon and all the soft smiles and subtle glances and slight hand touches, all the kisses and midnight laughter and whispers were its treasure, carefully guarded and lovingly protected.

“Do you want to talk about it,” James asked in the following silence.

“Mh,” Regulus let out a dissatisfied sigh. “I don’t know. It was nice I think. We didn’t really talk about much, but we weren’t trying to hurt each other either. It was like…uncomfortable neutrality?”

“Well, that’s a start,” James began tracing his fingers along Regulus’ arms and back lightly.

It was dark in their hotel room and freezing cold. The hum of the air conditioner ran in the background while the sounds of the city provided white noise. It was always easier for

Regulus to be honest with James in the dark.

“I love him a lot. He’s here. He’s trying. I’m trying.”

“I know,” James murmured reassuringly. “He knows too.”

James always had a way of saying things with such clarity, such assurity that Regulus often found himself in the habit of believing him.

The next day was all work for Regulus. He left James in the hotel, looking over the financial accounts. He’d been depositing Avery’s cash in as many increments as he could across different banks without drawing too much suspicion. James monitored the accounts religiously, though everything was perfect on his end. He was perfect. His mind was exceptional at working through the numbers and the data. Truthfully, Regulus could watch him work for hours, his eyebrows furrowed in concentration and glasses sliding down his nose as he bit his lip contemplatively, his fingers clacking away on the keyboard as his eyes scanned the screen. But he couldn’t, he had work to do himself, and so he left James at the hotel.

Another day, another small café owned by families and people Orion Black “trusted” in his day. Regulus wasn’t sure why he still picked the same places as his father to meet, he didn’t know if they were any safer than any other place or not, but the people there seemed to know him, or know of him, and they kept out of his way.

At the very least, Sirius seemed to think these places were their safest options too.

“You two are hungover,” Regulus scowled, sliding into the booth in the back next to Sirius.

Sirius slid over a mug of hot coffee he had ordered.

The whole place was grey and the lights were too bright. Everything felt sterile and cold. Sirius liked it. He thought it was modern and edgy, but Regulus thought everything was much too sharp, much too bright. Berlin seemed like the place for Sirius. Everyone was stylish and edgier here. Modern and streamlined in dark colours and white clean lights. Regulus preferred soft light, in yellow hazes and warm oranges, and this certainly was not that.

“Look,” Barty began, his dark eyes looking bloodshot and still glassy. “We are in Berlin. How are you going to take us to Berlin and not expect us to go out? Evan and I have had the time of our fucking lives.”

Evan looked pale and ill and Regulus raised a disapproving eyebrow at him.

“You two didn’t sleep last night, did you?”

Evan, to his credit, looked a little guilty while he shook his head but Barty just grinned.

“No, me and Evan were up all night. It was so dark in the club, you had no idea the sun was up, and the place we went, anything goes. Right, Evan? Anything.”

“Okay great,” Regulus responded flatly as Sirius rolled his eyes. “So. As for the work part. What do we know about Tom Riddle? Who is he? Where did he come from?”

“I don’t know,” Barty groaned, flopping over on the table dramatically. “He looks like he’s appeared out of nowhere. Just showed up with money and power and connections. I’ve been reaching out to old contacts and he knows everyone but no one really knows him.”

“What’s he in business of? How does he make all this money,” Sirius scowled. “And why is Lucius so keen to align himself with him?”

“From what we can tell,” Evan began. “He seems to have some political influence. There are a ton of rumours but nothing that we can confirm.”

“Rumours like what?”

“Hm. He has a long list of people he presumably killed. Hepzibah Smith. Amelia Bones. Bertha Jorkins. Frank Bryce. Mykew Gregorovitch. The list goes on. Some of them were minor political figures of different countries, some of them seemingly had no importance at all, and none of the deaths can be attributed to him for sure,” Barty sighed, holding the sides of his throbbing temples.

“We think he’s a high class political hitman of sorts, but it’s a stretch. Really we don’t know anything,” Evan finished with a heavy frown.

Sirius and Regulus shared a glance. Whoever Tom was, it was clear that he was dangerous and whatever his plans were, they were big enough for Lucius to want to be a part of them. Why they would need Regulus was unsettling. Where he would fit into this unknown puzzle was perplexing and unnerving.

Was it for the power? The bragging rights to say that Orion Black’s son was working for this unknown upstart? The reach that came with having Regulus and his contacts and his connections? Or was it for a darker and more sinister reason that Regulus couldn’t comprehend yet?

“Lucius wants to bring him to Copenhagen. To meet,” Regulus continued, taking a drink from his coffee to mask his nerves. “I don’t like it.”

He tried to calm his heart rate. He was already on edge, bringing everyone to people like Mulciber and Avery. People he knew, people he understood. He could pick apart every little reaction of theirs, chew it up and spit it out. He knew how they moved, how they talked, how they operated. He hated the idea that this Tom, this person he knew nothing about would be there with Lucius. He hated that Lucius had staked his ever-changing loyalty to Tom already and that Regulus had to bring the people he loved in front of a man he knew nothing about.

“Tell him you won’t do the swap if he brings Tom,” Evan spoke up, slouching low in his seat. Without a word, Barty handed him a cigarette and lit it for him.

“That’s a surefire way to get us all killed,” Sirius scoffed. “Regulus not following through on his promise is all Lucius needs to send his men after us looking to collect. They’ll kill us all,

take the paintings and the money and we'll be worm food."

Regulus ran his fingers through his hair, tugging a little harshly at the roots as he tried to think.

"You're family though, he would really," Evan trailed off at the look on Sirius' face.

"He would. Killing Regulus ensures he won't come back and use the Black family name to become more powerful than him. He would."

Regulus hated that. He was never sure where to fit in. He went back to his father's world and Lucius couldn't handle the competition, he left, and Lucius wanted him back. Lucius was always about control, always wavering, always unsure of what he wanted unless it was crystal clear he could benefit or control it somehow. Lucius wanted Regulus back in the business as long as Regulus worked *for* him. Never *with* him.

"Narcissa would never forgive him though," Regulus murmured.

"He wouldn't tell her the truth. The way he keeps her locked up and insulated at Malfoy Manor anyway, I doubt she'd ever find out," Sirius countered.

Regulus frowned and turned away to look at the wall for a few moments. Narcissa was always a force to witness. She had this magnetism that drew people toward her and Regulus always thought she was the peak of elegance and style. She was fierce, she was quick on her feet, and incredibly intelligent, but most importantly, at times, she was the only one in Regulus' life who seemed to remember that he was just a boy.

But then Lucius happened. Lucius who everyone seemed to accept as the most suitable match for Narcissa and Regulus watched as she made herself smaller and smaller to appease him and her family and pretty soon the entire of her being was able to fit and be locked away in Malfoy Manor. Her entire essence nearly extinguished.

Regulus wasn't entirely sure how it happened. He didn't know what Lucius said or did to turn Narcissa into a complacent, meek, and demure person, but Regulus hated him for it. He hated him for that more than anything.

"Lucius also called the police. What's our plan there? How are we putting the fear of God into him," Barty asked, his eyes glinting with ideas.

"No," Regulus shook his head, trying to collect all his thoughts. "I don't want to do anything until I get James out. And everyone else," Regulus added quickly. "I don't want anyone around that could be…impacted by whatever it is we decide to do. I want the heist done, I want it complete, I want everyone safe and dispersed, and then we can think about how to handle Lucius."

"I don't think we should handle him at all," Sirius scowled. "How is that not still participating in that world, Regulus? You promised me. You said the heist and then you were done, with all of it. You can't be done if you're still planning vengeance and revenge on these people. You promised."

Barty let out a derisive snort and opened his mouth to speak but a warning look from Regulus stopped him.

“This meeting was supposed to be about Tom,” Regulus sighed.

“Regulus,” Sirius looked at him warningly. “I fucking mean it. I held up my end of the deal. You fucking hold up yours.”

Regulus threw his hand up to keep Sirius’ anger at bay. “Okay. I will. I will. Fuck.”

“So we just let him get away with it,” Barty spat out fiercely. “How is that okay?”

A waitress came by with a coffee pot and began to refill everyone’s cups. Regulus waited for her to leave before he began to speak again.

“It’s not. But this is it. This was always the end for me, getting back at him isn’t worth that. If anyone finds any information about Tom Riddle, confirmed or otherwise, you come to me. Clear?”

Everyone nodded. Barty rolled eyes.

“We’re meeting with Lestrange tonight. I don’t want any slip ups. No mistakes,” Regulus began.

He felt Sirius go rigid beside him.

“It’s his son. Bellatrix’s husband,” Regulus said more lowly. “You don’t have to go.”

“Fuck that, of course I’m going,” Sirius said tearsley.

“Sirius,” Regulus warned, already feeling a little bit of panic twinge in his chest. “The sins of the father aren’t necessarily the sins of the son you know. You have to be untouchable in there. If you can’t do that, you put everyone in danger. You put Remus in danger. He might bring up what happened that night, just to see if it’ll get to you. You have to be untouchable.”

Sirius gripped the coffee cup in his hands tightly, and Regulus was worried he would shake it hard enough that it would slosh over the sides.

“If he even looks like he’s going to shoot you, Evan and I will take care of it okay?” Barty looked at him sincerely.

“You don’t even like me.”

“Yeah but Regulus does. And we like Lestrange a lot less,” Evan cut in.

“No one is shooting anyone. Everything is fine. Barty, Evan, you two should shower and sleep before tonight please. You smell like a distillery and you look like you’re sweating vodka as we speak,” Regulus spoke again.

Evan snorted and Barty finished his overly sweetened coffee before they both got up and left, tapping on the table as their way of saying goodbye.

Sirius and Regulus sat there for a minute side by side, not speaking. They just drank their coffee quietly.

“I won’t let anything happen to you tonight,” Regulus said at last, surprised by how fierce his voice sounded. He needed Sirius to know that at the very least. He wouldn’t let anything like what happened to him before happen again.

“Funny,” Sirius let out a dry laugh. “I think that’s supposed to be my line.”

“Yeah, well nothing is going to happen to either of us. But don’t let anything happen to me either,” Regulus tried to smile.

Sirius nudged his shoulder. “Fucking Lestranges. They’re mental.”

“Bella fits right in,” Regulus shook his head.

“She’s the most batshit of them all. How are we possibly related to all these psychos?”

“We’re just as psycho I think,” Regulus snorted into his coffee cup.

“Oi, speak for yourself,” Sirius gasped in mock outrage. “We may be psycho, but we’re not Bellatrix level. And we look out for each other. So we’re not like our family at all.”

“We look out for each other,” Regulus asked, echoing Sirius’ previous statement.

“Now we do.”

“Yeah,” Regulus nodded, knowing for once in his life he was doing the right thing. “Now we do.”

“Listen, after the heist, Remus and I are– we’re buying a flat and we want to throw a dinner party to commemorate it. Like a housewarming thing, and we’d really like it if you and James would come,” Sirius hid his face in his coffee cup.

“What?” Regulus blinked a few times.

“Look, don’t be a dick. This is my way of saying–of asking to see you. You know, after.”

“You’re inviting me to dinner? Like to sit down? And you’re going to what? Cook?”

“You’re being a dick. Just fucking show up with nice wine so you don’t complain about ours, will you? And bring James so Remus has a friend to talk to when we inevitably get drunk and start yelling at each other.”

Regulus did his best to hold in his smile. “Sounds riveting.”

“So are you going to come?”

“Yeah. I’ll go. And I’ll bring James. And we will sit and drink wine while we pretend to eat the inedible food you’ll serve us. I’ll bring a plant or something, for your new place.”

“That would be nice,” Sirius said, clinking their glasses together. Regulus frowned slightly as some coffee spilled up and over the sides, landing on the table.

This was progress. Sirius wanted him. Sirius actually wanted him around, after. After everything he had done, Sirius still wanted him to go to dinner, to be a part of his new life, to try.

“Uh, Sirius,” Regulus said as Sirius stood up from the table. “Um, I’d actually, really like to go.”

Sirius ran his finger through his hair, pushing it out of his face. “Oh, yeah. Cool. Wait until you’ve eaten what I’ve cooked first before you say anything else like that though,” he smiled in his self-deprecating way and they walked out. The little bell on the door chimed to announce their exit.

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“Another round for Peter here, on me,” James grinned at the bartender as he patted Peter on the back jovially.

Remus eyed the cold pint of beer as it was placed in front of Peter and then looked at James warningly. “I don’t know if this is the smarter idea, drinking before tonight,” he muttered lowly.

“We’re not getting him drunk, plus I’ll have him back with plenty of time to take a nap and sleep it off beforehand right, Pete?”

“Right,” Peter agreed, taking a generous gulp of the amber liquid. His face was already rosy.

Remus and James weren’t drinking, but James did say he would take Peter out for drinks and James was also pretty certain that Peter’s skills wouldn’t be needed for the swap tonight anyway.

The pub they had gone to was practically empty and the lighting was dim at best. It was easy to lose track of time in a place that kept its windows closed and room dark. It reminded James of a place Regulus would pick to meet. Small, and inauspicious.

“Did Sirius ever say what they were meeting about today?” James turned to Remus, frowning.

Once again, Regulus left him this morning alone in the hotel room, with vague explanations about work meetings that James was no longer a part of. It wouldn’t bother him so much if he wasn’t worried. It was the worrying that bothered him. Thinking that Regulus might be

making plans to do something stupid and dangerous and vengeful. That's what worried him, and Barty and Evan weren't exactly solid voices of reason.

"No he didn't," Remus sighed. "He's just happy to be included I think."

"Regulus really values his opinion," James conceded.

"It's hard being on the outside isn't it," Peter asked, spinning back and forth in his chair. "You think you get used to it but you never stop wondering what happens behind all the closed doors."

Remus and James stole an uncomfortable glance.

"You two are the boyfriends. So you know more than anyone else really. Well, James does at the very least. But me and Mary and Marlene we just all have to go wherever and not question anything when Regulus goes on his secret meetings. We have to have blind trust that whatever he's doing, he's doing for the greater good of the group," Peter continued, still spinning and drinking. His tone was light and unbothered as if he was just reciting the morning paper.

"Well, Pete," James coughed uncomfortably.

"No it's okay," Peter held his hands up and let out a little laugh. Maybe he was a little more tipsy than James thought. "It happens. I'm just here for the ride or whatever. Plus, you've all made my job incredibly easy all things considered. I'm making millions and all I had to do was clean your arm, really. And he always does good for the group."

Remus gave James a look that very clearly said ' *time to go.* '

"But I'm just sayin', if I was in charge of things, or allowed in the meetings even, then I'd tell Regulus…look Mary and Lily make more fake paintings and we sell the fake ones as real ones and we sell the real ones too and make double our profit. Selling the fake paintings as real ones is genius!"

"Okay Peter," Remus grabbed his arm, pulling him close. "Maybe let's keep our voice down," he whispered with wide eyes. Peter had gotten a little too excited at sharing his plans.

"Yeah, maybe we should go," James nodded, looking around. There was only one other person in there, a young man by the door with his face in a book attempting to read by the very dim light. He didn't seem to be paying attention, and the bartender must have gone on break because he was nowhere to be seen either.

They all got to their feet to leave.

"I'm just saying," Peter mumbled as Remus and James ushered him outside and into the light of day. "Also, I don't think it's fair that everyone joined the heist and just fell in love."

"Peter Jesus, use code or something mate, we're in public," Remus sighed pulling him down the streets quickly.

“Like what the hell is that about?” Peter continued on undeterred. “Marlene and Dorcas are engaged and that’s great, I’m really happy for them, I love that, but,” Peter sighed exasperated. “And you have Regulus and Remus has Sirius.”

“Well I don’t think Mary or Lily are seeing anyone unless you know something I don’t,” James offered helpfully.

“They’re always alone and together,” Peter responded sullenly.

“Yeah, well by logic that means that–” James stopped himself. He was going to say that meant that Barty and Evan were together but honestly, he wasn’t entirely sure that they weren’t. He had no idea what was going on there, but it wasn’t really his business. Luckily, Peter had already moved on.

“You know, it won’t really matter, because soon enough, I’m gonna be rich and women will just flock to me because I can buy them all kinds of nice things.”

“That’s the spirit Pete,” Remus grinned. “But I’m sure women already flock to you. You’re a fucking doctor.”

Peter grinned at that. “I suppose, it’s just been so long since I’ve had contact with the outside world. My grasp on reality is slipping.”

“You and me both,” Remus shook his head.

"We should go out dancing. All of us. I used to dance all the time and since the heist, I haven't been able to go out. If I was invited to the secret meetings, I'd tell Regulus that we should plan time to go out dancing."

“Look at you Peter, you get a little drink in you, and you’re ready to air out all your grievances,” James laughed. It was kind of nice the way Peter just freed himself of all his burdens with child-like sincerity. James could appreciate that.

When they arrived at the hotel, they all split up, calling out their goodbyes to see each other later that night. Peter was humming softly to himself as he walked through the lobby.

James made his way up to the freezing hotel room and showered before he flopped into the bed. He would just nap for a few minutes until Regulus got back and then they could do something. Maybe they could go out for a little while before the swap. However, when he woke up, the room was considerably darker and Regulus was there, laying next to him. The glow from a bedside lamp was the only thing lighting the room.

“You’re up,” Regulus murmured as James’ eyes fluttered open. He attempted to get his bearings.

“What time is it? You could’ve woken me up,” James responded, a smile overcoming his features at Regulus’ proximity.

“I know, you just looked so peaceful. I didn’t have the heart,” Regulus brushed the hair out of James’ face tenderly. “You should get up and eat something though before we leave. We have

a long night ahead of us."

James nodded, pulling Regulus' hand to his lips as he kissed his palm. "How was the meeting?"

"It was fine," Regulus sighed. "Just figuring some things out for Copenhagen is all."

James hummed noncommittally.

"Sirius invited us to dinner," Regulus let out a little snort. "At his and Remus' new flat after the heist is completely over."

James sat up quickly with a jolt. "They already bought a flat? When? Where?"

"No, I don't think they have," Regulus responded quickly. "I think it was more of a future plan. Nothing solid. But I think they are pretty serious about living together. And I think that would be fine if they did buy a flat already. It's good to plan ahead for the future, you know? Like, I don't think that it would be too soon or anything if they did. Get a place. Right?"

"Oh right," James agreed, feeling relieved that Remus hadn't made life changing plans without telling him. "And Sirius invited us to go together? As a couple?" For some reason this thought was almost too endearing to James. James and Regulus were a unit, they did things together because they were together.

"Yeah, as a couple of *friends* ," Regulus deadpanned. "What kind of question is that? Last time I checked you were my pretty serious boyfriend."

"Hm," James laughed as he laid back down and kissed Regulus. "I don't know about serious, but I am definitely your pretty boyfriend."

"No," Regulus smiled. "No, I'm the serious one between the two of us."

"And pretty," James added. "We're both pretty."

"Yeah, they should paint a portrait of us and hang it somewhere real nice," Regulus mused.

"So someone like Barty can come along hundreds of years from now and mock our hairstyles and what we were wearing," James laughed and Regulus laughed too. It was always such a nice sound, the two of them laughing together. It was a perfect sound.

"But it is nice to think about," Regulus murmured after a minute. "Us. Hundreds of years from now. Still here, even when we're not. Still together."

"Look, I don't know a lot. I have no idea what happens when we die or what next week looks like, let alone hundreds of years in the future," James began, studying the grey in Regulus' eyes and the way his dark eyelashes brushed his cheeks with each blink. "But I do know that there's still an us hundreds of years from now. We're still together. That's the only thing I know for sure."

Regulus closed his eyes and let out a noise caught between a sigh and a sob. “I really fucking love you James Potter.”

“Yeah,” James scooped Regulus up into his arms and pulled him close. “Yeah, I really fucking love you back.”

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The air was cooler and damp in Berlin. James liked it better that way. He hated when the air was hot and caused your clothes to stick to your skin and sweat to bead at your forehead. Everyone rode in silence. It was perfectly quiet, Barty tried to turn on the radio but Regulus wouldn’t let him.

They all knew what their roles were. They all knew what to expect after Amsterdam, so there were less nerves about the setup and operation part of the swap and more nerves about who they would be meeting. Rodolphus Lestrange.

When James walked into the restaurant, it looked nearly identical to the one in Amsterdam. Small, cold, dark. He wasn’t sure what all the fanfare was about, why everyone was on edge. The way James saw it was this: both parties were participating in a mutually beneficial exchange. Lestrange had the cash, and they had the art. There was no need for guns or fraught nerves or tension, and he couldn’t understand why there was.

Lestrange’s people were already there. They were tall men, the one by the door was so tall and sturdy that his body covered the door in its entirety. Another man was in the back corner, smoking and looking bored. The smoke from the cigarette contributed to the unbreathable atmosphere. There was a third man in the opposite corner, eyeing them all carefully.

James looked at all the paintings lined up neatly against the wall. The dim light didn’t do any of them justice. They were duller and cast in heavy shadow. He listened to the steady drip of water that was coming from a leaky pipe near the back of the room. Then he heard the loud echo of heavy footsteps coming from the back.

“Evan,” Regulus said lowly into the earpiece.

“It’s alright. I’ve already got McKinnon in the back,” Evan answered quickly.

James didn’t understand the exchange until Rodolphus Lestrange came into view with two men flanking behind him. They were outnumbered by one man, which is why they needed Marlene. James waited to see her walk in behind them, he waited to see her blonde hair and eyes blazing with fire, but when she didn’t appear, James figured that she was hiding in the kitchen, or at the backdoor with Evan. James also wondered why Evan had asked Marlene. Her job was to drive one of the cars. Remus, Mary, and Lily were the extra set of hands. He tried not to think too hard about it. He was sure Evan had it handled.

The gun felt like lead in James' hand and Lestrange looked around, grinning widely as came to stand in the centre of the room.

"Pretty pictures you got there, Regulus." He eyed the canvases hungrily. "Your heist has made the news."

"Is there a reason you brought another fucking man with you tonight? We agreed on five. Now I know you've never been very good at counting," Regulus began quietly, "but that's a new low. Even for you Rodolphus."

Regulus' voice was cold and without emotion. If James didn't know him, if James didn't love him, he would be terrified.

"Yeah," Rodolphus' beady eyes glinted. "And I thought we agreed no fucking cops but he's here." He nodded towards Sirius. "I need two of my guys to keep an eye on *him* ."

If Sirius was bothered by the venom Rodolphus was spitting at him, he made no indication of it.

"He was there with Avery. I know he told you that," Regulus shook his head. "And nothing happened. Everything was fine."

"Yeah? I'll be the judge of that," Rodolphus continued, not taking his eyes off Sirius.

He gave a sharp whistle and nodded in the direction of the paintings and one of the men that had walked in with him moved to examine the first canvas.

"So, are you going ask about your cousin or can you no longer be bothered," Rodolphus asked, drawing Regulus' attention away from the man inspecting the paintings. James took over watching as the man poured over the paintings with UV lights and magnifying glasses.

"Bellatrix is more than capable of taking care of herself," Regulus returned flatly.

"Damn right she is," Lestrange let out a twisted and grating laugh. "You see this?" He pulled down his shirt to show a long, fleshy scar running the length of his collarbone. "Crazy bitch slashed me. She thought I was cheating on her."

"Were you?"

"Yeah," Lestrange laughed again, needing a minute to catch his breath. One of the men hiding in the shadowy corners laughed too. "Yeah, I was."

When Regulus didn't laugh, Rodolphus returned his attention back to Sirius.

"My father told me about what happened that night. I'm sure you know he's dead now but I'll apologise on his behalf anyway. I would never shoot you in a place that has the potential to be non-lethal. I always shoot to kill. Foolish mistake on his part, keeping you alive, considering that you grew up to be a traitorous cop. But hey," Rodolphus gave a twisted grin to Sirius, "glad you two were able to do some brotherly reconciliation. For a minute there it seemed like Orion and Regulus were going to finish what my father didn't. Pity."

“Fuck off Lestrange,” Regulus sounded bored.

Next to him, James could feel Sirius shake slightly before he calmed himself. Time was moving exceedingly slow.

“Your father didn’t kill Sirius because he was terrified of what Orion’s retaliation would be. Shoot him in a potentially non-lethal place and you have plausible deniability. Coward’s way out.”

Lestrange stiffened slightly and Barty raised his gun, in a swift almost imperceptible motion.

“And I’d be very careful about what you say next, or you’ll find out what my retaliation will be, and I cut way fucking deeper than Bellatrix. Believe me.”

James held his breath. The tension was once again getting unbearable. He wanted to loosen the collar of his shirt, he wanted a cold glass of water, he wanted to leave.

Rodolphus raised both of his eyebrows and then laughed again. He had two gold teeth that glinted in the light. James thought these men laughed at the strangest things.

“Glad to see you can leave the family, but the family never really leaves you. Are you fucking done over there?” Lestrange looked sharply over at the man inspecting the paintings.

The man stood quickly, nodding. The other two men in the corners came forward and dropped four heavy bags full of cash in the middle of the room.

“Avery wants to know which one is your precious little boyfriend,” Lestrange eyed Barty and James back and forth as the other men receded back into the shadowy corners. “Lucius said he’s working with you.”

James saw Regulus tense slightly and he felt his own heartbeat quicken with a fierce drum. He felt pinned down under Lestrange's gaze, like a butterfly in a display case, subject to observation and examination.

“The rest of the money, Lestrange. Where is it?” Regulus ignored him entirely.

Rodolphus gave a strange wave of his hand and one of the men in the corner began speaking lowly.

“Lucius didn’t give any more information than that, but my guess is the one in the glasses back there,” Rodolphus flashed James a cold, toothy smile. "He promised me he would be with you tonight."

“And Lucius also promised to bail your company out when it went under the first time, didn't he? And look how that turned out. I guess you could say he’s always been full of shit,” Regulus returned flatly at the same time Dorcas confirmed she had the money transfer.

Regulus nodded at James and Sirius to begin picking up the bags of money at the centre of the room. They both advanced quickly as Lestrange’s men began picking up the paintings with a great deal less care than Sirius had showed them.

“Aw,” Rodolphus placed the hand that was holding the gun to his heart like he’d been struck. “Too far, Regulus. You know I just like getting under your skin, no need to bring up old family drama.”

“Funny, bringing up old family drama seems like your specialty,” Regulus scoffed as he motioned for James and Sirius to head towards the door. James didn’t like this part. Crossing to the otherside of the room where Lestrange and his men were. He didn’t like turning his back to them or the feeling of unease it instilled in him.

“You could’ve been so fucking powerful, Regulus. Your father left you an empire and you left it all behind, so people like Tom Riddle could swoop in and command the forces,” Lestrange sighed. “It hurts me. Physically, it pains me.”

James continued into the kitchen where Marlene was standing there, gun drawn low at her side, with wide eyes and a determined expression. She took the bags from James' hands wordlessly and motioned for him to take her place in the kitchen.

“What do you know about Tom,” Regulus asked, pausing. He was halfway in the kitchen and halfway out.

“I don’t particularly like the guy, but Bellatrix does and so does Lucius. He’s new money. I don’t know anything more than you I’m sure. Why? Thinking of coming back? Worried about the competition?”

“Hardly,” Regulus glared before turning around.

“Always so moody,” Rodolphus called after Regulus as they walked through the kitchen. “If I never see you again, it would be too soon!”

"Believe me, that won't be a problem," Regulus muttered so only James could hear.

They stepped out into the cold air and James felt as if he could breathe again. He watched as Regulus checked the van for the bags, bouncing nervously on his feet. He could hear noise coming from the inside of the building, faint laughter and soft thuds, and then they jumped in the van, the car accelerating at a lightning pace in mere seconds.

James rolled his window down and laughed into the night. Marlene took one look at him and did the same, her blonde hair whipping around wildly as they sped down the empty streets of the city.

“What is going on,” Mary asked, laughing at the overt display of joy happening between the two.

“Adrenaline,” James grinned madly. “It’s a hell of a drug.”

As much as he hated the feeling of being inside, standing face to face with people like Avery and Lestrange, he couldn’t deny the high he felt afterwards. That feeling of invincibility that raced through his veins. He felt that way with Regulus frequently, but tonight he leaned into the feeling that the heist brought too.

“To Italy!” Marlene was hollering out the window into the wind, one hand was sticking out and waving in the breeze.

“To Italy,” James echoed, and Mary leaned forward to turn the radio on full blast. German house music blared through the speakers.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter is Italy. Next chapter is Italy! Yk what’s gonna happen in Italy?

also next chapter will be longer and better! <3 okay byee love youse

Chapter 33: Portofino

Chapter Summary

y'all thought there would be bad vibes in italy? ITALY? Dorlene's dream wedding destination?

Chapter Notes

tw: sexual content!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Portofino was by far Remus' favourite place. It was coastal and beautiful and he rolled the windows down and breathed in the salty air. They arrived while it was still dark, the ocean black and monotonously beating against the shore. The buildings along the coast were lit and gave everything a soft glow.

The hotel was nice too. With Regulus, all their hotels were nice, but this one seemed especially luxurious. The inside was gilded and shiny and the 24 hour concierge service was impeccable as they took their bags and issued their room keys. They were all tired from Berlin and they didn't speak as they dispersed quickly. This routine was getting pretty familiar to Remus by now too, arriving in the early morning after being up all night making art swaps and flying on private jets. It was a criminal lifestyle, but one that came with good food, beautiful countries, and a fuckload of money.

"This place is incredible," Sirius breathed out, already flinging open their hotel room doors that led outside. The fresh air billowed in. "I love Italy."

Remus hummed in agreement as he rummaged through his things.

"Oh my God," Sirius called, his voice coming out faint. He walked through the door that led to the balcony. "Remus get out here right now. Right. Now."

Smiling to himself at Sirius' excitement, Remus strode across the room and out into the open air where Sirius was standing. They were right on the water and Remus closed his eyes to listen to the sounds of the waves.

When Sirius couldn't wait any longer, he slipped his hand into Remus' and dragged him over to a small set of stairs that led down away from the hotel to a secluded alcove tucked right underneath the balcony to their room.

Here, the water from the ocean lapped eagerly at their feet and they could see all the boats bobbing in the water with ease. It was a small area, barely big enough for both of them to sit down, but it was beautiful nonetheless.

Remus backed up slightly away from the water and sat on the dry part of the stones, taking his shoes off so that the waves could occasionally reach his feet and Sirius did the same.

They sat shoulder to shoulder next to each other in silence for a good while, watching the sky change gradually as it ushered in the morning.

It was astounding how drastically different Remus' life was. They were still in a constant whirlwind of travel, which didn't allow him to stop and think about all of his collective actions. The heist, the swaps, any of it. He was a part of something, he had successfully completed the largest art swap in history. He was a criminal and a wanted man and he was also wealthy beyond imagination, and so far, undetected. He had no idea how his life had become irrevocably entwined with art and Siriuis and danger and camaraderie, but it was beautiful, it was his life, and he wouldn't trade it for anything.

"What are you thinking about," Sirius asked, nudging him softly.

"Us, the heist, everything," Remus admitted. "It feels like a dream sitting next to you, here in Italy. It feels like a crazy and wonderful dream. I mean, we just did an art swap in Berlin hours ago with someone who wouldn't hesitate to kill us all and now I'm here, with you, in Portofino." Remus let a laugh of incredulity sneak out of him. "A dream."

"Yeah," Sirius let out a sigh. He was staring out at the water with his knees drawn in towards his chest. "I never thought I'd be back here, doing this. It's thrilling, but it's also…hard. I worry a lot. About you. About Regulus. It's…I'll be glad when it's over is all," Sirius finished.

"But it wasn't all bad right? I mean we had some good moments there. We're still having good moments," Remus found himself defending. He didn't like the idea of being a contributing factor to Sirius' unhappiness, and while he knew he and Sirius had moved on from the blame and anger, it was still a sensitive subject to approach.

"No. No, most of it has been, exceptionally magical. It brought me to you. It brought me back to Regulus. It brought me friends and an opportunity to see the world. That's magic if I've ever known it."

Remus leaned over and kissed him, wanting to keep everything on a good note. It was a soft kiss at first, and then Sirius deepened it. Remus quickly pulled him into his lap. He could never get enough of Sirius Black. He would never be able to hold him close enough or kiss him long enough or see his smile enough.

"Should we shag out here," Sirius asked breathlessly once he pulled away after a few minutes. "We have quite the view."

Remus let out a short laugh. "The salt water and the stone…not a great combination. I mean I do want to shag you, I always want to shag you- not to sound like a perv. But just not out

here."

Sirius threw his head back and laughed which gave Remus ample room to begin kissing down his neck greedily.

"Okay, then back up stairs we go. Up, up," he moaned softly when Remus bit down slightly on his soft skin.

Wordlessly, Remus clumsily attempted to pick Sirius up and carry him up the stairs to their hotel room while he laughed loudly. Remus didn't even bother trying to get their shoes, they would still be there in the morning.

The following day led to several more monumental and uproarious events that resulted in a steady stream of people filtering in and out of Remus' hotel room.

The first person was none other than Marlene McKinnon, who woke Remus from his peaceful sleep by pounding on his door with what seemed like the force of thirty people all at once.

"Remus hi," Marlene giggled, smiling brightly as he flung open the door.

Dorcas was also standing outside in the hall, her arm wrapped around Marlene tightly.

"Remus hi," Dorcas echoed. "We just came here to invite you and Sirius to our wedding tomorrow afternoon. If you're free."

Marlene let out a little jump of delight. "Oh, he'll be free."

Remus blinked a few times, his sour mood at being woken up dissipated instantly at the news. "I'm sorry, what?"

"We found a little chapel this morning on our walk and we always joked about getting married in Italy and we're here in Italy, with our friends, and now seemed as good a time as any, so we're getting married tomorrow. Wear a suit. Tell Sirius. Regulus knows," Marlene was speaking with rapid excitement.

"Regulus knows?" Remus was struggling to keep up.

"About the wedding! The details! We have to go! You're the last ones we've told, and Mary and Lily are taking us out to go dress shopping," Dorcas grinned. "Anyway tomorrow at three. At the chapel. Don't be late."

And then, just as soon as they had arrived, both girls bounded down the hall and out of sight.

"Did I hear that right," Sirius asked from the bed. "Are they getting married? They just got engaged. They literally just got engaged."

"Incredible," Remus found himself grinning from the girl's contagious excitement. "I guess I need to go buy a suit."

Sirius pulled the covers away from his face and mirrored Remus' grin. "I do love a good wedding."

Shortly after Marlene and Dorcas' visit, Remus heard two quick knocks on the door.

"It's Regulus," Sirius said, still in bed. He had just called to order breakfast, more like lunch, to the room. "Let him in."

For the second time that morning, Remus flung open the door, only to be met with a slightly frazzled looking Regulus and a weepy looking James.

"Remus," James wrapped him in a big hug, barreling into the room.

"He's been like this since Marlene came by this morning and he's not distressed he's just–"

"Happy," James answered, still hugging Remus. "You heard the news?"

"About Marlene and Dorcas getting married tomorrow? Yes," Remus laughed, pulling away.

"No," James waved his hand dramatically. "Well, yes, but also. She asked me to be the best man," James practically wailed as he hugged Remus again.

"Oi, no way," Sirius called from the bed as Regulus closed the door softly behind him. "I took the engagement photographs! I should be the best man."

"Don't take this from him," Regulus muttered. "He's very–"

"Happy," James finished again. "I'm going to explode, I'm so happy."

Then he pulled away with wide eyes.

"Anyway we're here because we're going to go shopping for tomorrow," Regulus continued. "James wanted…we wanted to know if you two would like to come with us."

"We need decorations for the chapel and flowers and a wedding present, oh God. There's so much to do," James ran a hand through his hair. "A cake. They have to have a cake. And food maybe. A reception? Why are they doing this so last minute? This is a wedding for the love of God!"

"Shh, love I'll take care of it. We'll take care of it all today, don't worry. It'll work out," Regulus tried to assure him. Knowing James and based on the frazzled look Regulus still dawned, Remus knew it was safe to assume that James had been oscillating back and forth between utter joy and nerves for the ceremony all morning.

"Absolutely we want to go," Sirius sat up from the bed. "Remus needs a suit. We can be ready in an hour."

So that's how Remus found himself wandering the streets of Portofino with Sirius as James and Regulus took over, popping into shops, arms overflowing with bags, and smiles wide at the prospect of a wedding.

They stopped by the chapel. It was incredibly small. Remus thought it would barely fit twenty people. Regulus explained that there was a man there who was willing to officiate the wedding by the name of Lorenzo. At least the small size meant that it would be easy to decorate.

By the time they had arrived back at the hotel, Remus was exhausted. He wanted to take a shower and jump back into bed. Sirius was busy wrapping up a very expensive espresso machine for a wedding present. There was no wedding registry, but both Sirius and Remus were under the impression that a good espresso machine was the foundation for a good marriage, and therefore was necessary.

They'd never be able to top James and Regulus' wedding present anyway. All of them were already blowing through their newfound money, though the day's purchases didn't even slightly dent their overflowing bank accounts.

The third time there was a knock on the door, Remus opened it to find Peter who was holding up different tie colours and had a bag full of wedding gifts in tow. It seemed Peter was also keen to blow through his newfound money as well. He needed opinions about which gift was the perfect one and which tie said 'wedding in Italy.' Sirius was all too happy to provide his numerous opinions and Remus managed to slip away after a while to take a shower. When he emerged from the bathroom, Peter had left and Sirius was back in bed already.

"There's really going to be a wedding tomorrow," Remus shook his head in disbelief.

"Who would we be if not spur of the moment people, huh? We only have one life. Best to live everyday like it's your last or whatever," Sirius grinned, patting the empty spot in bed to urge Remus in.

"Well I don't know about you, but I plan on being around for a very long time.Things can take more time, you know? I don't want to rush through my life either," Remus sighed, flopping into bed.

"Yeah," Sirius kissed the side of his face and Remus squinched his eyes closed. "I know you, Moony. Which is why we're not doing a joint wedding with Marlene and Dorcas tomorrow."

Sirius reached over to turn off the lights, plunging them into darkness.

"Ha ha," Remus shook his head at the thought of a double wedding.

"No, we'd upstage them anyway. Best to let them have their moment," Sirius said decisively in the dark and Remus snorted.

"Sorry. Have you seen Dorcas? You are the hottest person I've ever seen Sirius but both of us combined couldn't upstage her on her worst day. Besides, Marlene would probably sneak in here and shave each of our eyebrows off just to make sure of it."

At that Sirius laughed loudly, rolling over to press himself close to Remus.

“There’s really going to be a wedding tomorrow,” Sirius murmured into the side of Remus’ neck and Remus did his best not to shiver at the feeling of Sirius’ lips grazing lightly over his skin.

“I’m very happy for them,” Remus sighed, trying to sleep.

The next day, Remus barely had any time to shower before James had dragged him and Sirius out of the hotel and into the tiny chapel. Lily was also there, and all four of them quickly got to work decorating the small pews and aisle with white tulle and flowers.

“So, Regulus is mad at me,” James began once he managed to pull Remus away to himself.

Sirius was already distracted and was now wrapping Lily up in white tulle to look like a mummy. Both of their laughs echoed in the small church.

Remus frowned. “How can he be mad at you? What happened?”

“It’s not a big deal. We’re fine, he just didn’t want to come to the church with me this morning,” James sighed, tugging at his hair self-consciously.

“Again, what happened?”

James smiled sheepishly. “It’s bad luck to see each other the night before the wedding, and I’m the best man. So, it’s my job to make sure there is no bad luck. Anyway, I went to Marlene’s room and she was obviously with Dorcas and I told her she had to leave.”

“Still not seeing why Regulus would be mad.”

“I told Marlene she could stay with us. In our room. Only because she said she would get lonely and I didn’t trust her to not sneak back into Dorcas’ room. And I’m the best man! It’s the least I could do.”

“No you didn’t. You invited McKinnon to stay with you and Regulus? She snores! And she took you up on it?” Remus couldn’t help the large smile that overcame his features.

“Yeah. Regulus was not happy,” James shook his head. “I think at one point during the night he tried to smother me in my sleep with a pillow. He’s not very big on sleepovers I guess. But she slept on the pull out couch!”

At that Remus let out a loud laugh. “So he’s back at the hotel?”

“Yeah, he’s sleeping because he didn’t sleep at all last night. Marlene’s presence was too distracting,” James rolled his eyes.

“I’m sure he’ll be fine as soon as he gets some sleep,” Remus tried to assure him. “It really is bad luck to see each other before the wedding, he has to understand that, surely.”

“Thank you,” James patted his shoulder. “Remus, you are the best friend anyone could ask for. You make me feel like I never do anything wrong.”

“You do so, so many things wrong, James. So many. But I support you and pretend you are right anyway.”

“True friendship,” James cheered.

After they were done with the church they all rushed back to get ready. Remus hadn’t seen Marlene or Dorcas since they knocked on his door yesterday and he figured he wouldn’t see them at all until the wedding.

He soon found himself heading back to the chapel with Sirius and Barty and Evan in tow.

“You look good in a suit Evan,” Sirius grinned, pulling open the chapel doors as they filed in. The news of the wedding had put him in an exceptional mood.

“Thank you very much. I recently came into some money and decided to splurge,” Evan smiled, wiggling his eyebrows.

“Evan looks good all the time,” Barty frowned and Remus and Sirius shared a knowing glance. “I picked the suit.”

“Yeah but I picked the tie,” Evan added with an amicable shrug.

The tiny chapel was decorated beautifully, which was almost entirely thanks to James. White tulle and pink and white flowers lined the aisle and the pews and the arches on the doorways and windows. The piano player was already present and was playing a soft melody and off to one side, Peter sat with Mary and Lily, talking quickly.

Remus followed behind Sirius as he took a seat next to Barty and Evan. He left enough room for James and Regulus to sit when they arrived. He thought it was odd that neither of them were there yet, considering James took weddings very seriously, and he was the best man. The air was alight with excitement. Remus was still trying to wrap his head around the fact that Marlene and Dorcas were getting married, so soon. It was a wonderful thing, just– rapidity seemed to be everyone’s middle name.

To prove his point, James and Regulus both came bounding down the aisle and slid into the pew hurriedly and a little breathless.

“Close call,” Remus smirked at James who was readjusting the glasses on his face. “You were almost late.”

“Yeah,” James grinned back. “We lost track of time a bit, but we made it!”

Remus glanced at James’ hand which was clasped in Regulus’. “I take it you two made up from this morning.”

“Oh, we made up,” James nodded, his smile turning more conspiratorial. He was speaking in a low whisper.

“You apologised?”

“Something like that.” James glanced over at Regulus and when he was sure Regulus wasn’t paying attention to their whispered conversation he added, “I had to get on my knees– not that I was complaining too much– but it’s hard to properly apologise when your mouth is ful–”

“-James,” Remus strained, cutting him off. He took a closer look at James’ dishevelled hair and upended collar and winced slightly.

“What? We talk about this stuff! Since when did you get all coy?” James let out a little laugh and Remus saw Regulus smile slightly at the sound even though he was talking to Peter from across the aisle.

“Since we were sitting in a church,” Remus shot back, his eyes wide. “I’m glad you two are…made up.”

James hummed, “Yeah me too,” he brought Regulus’ hand up to his mouth and gave it a kiss absentmindedly.

A few minutes later, Remus saw the clergyman, Lorenzo, walk out from the heavy wooden doors and down the aisle. He was carrying a small red book in his hands and he smiled at everyone as he took his spot at the front of the church. He was a short man with wispy grey hair and soft eyes. He looked like a man who had seen both the good and bad and the world and let the events of life carve him into the kindest person he could possibly be. As soon as he was settled at the front, he gave a nod to the pianist who began playing with more purpose and everyone sitting in the pews stood up quickly.

Lily let out a little gasp as the doors opened once again and Dorcas came into view. She was a dazzling vision all dressed in white and her normally cool exterior had completely melted as she walked down the aisle with misty and happy eyes.

“I picked those flowers,” James leaned in to whisper to Remus. “Do you approve?”

Remus nodded quickly.

Sirius was doing his best to snap a few discrete photographs.

Next, Marlene walked out. Her hair was pulled back away from her face and she had a smattering of little flowers in it. She was normally someone who donned a large grin in her day-to-day life, but now she wore a demure and meek smile and not one person would doubt that this was the most important thing she had ever done in her life.

As Marlene and Dorcas stood across from one another, separated only by the clergyman, Remus was struck by the thought that he had entered into a small bubble of enchantment where everything was sparkling and radiant and unmarred by the woes of the world. He knews James felt it too because he was staring up at the ceiling, blinking rapidly.

Lorenzo motioned for everyone to sit. As soon as they did, he opened his little red book and began reading from it in hurried Italian. Remus did his best to pay attention, and it became

very clear after a few minutes, that no parts of the ceremony would not be conducted in English.

He could tell by the looks on everyone else's faces that they had no idea the wedding would be in Italian either, and Remus quickly did his best to listen for English cognates that would give him a semblance of direction in a sea of Italian.

“What is he saying?” Sirius leaned in to whisper in Remus’ ear and Remus shrugged dramatically.

“I have no idea. How did they get him to agree to a last minute wedding like this anyway? Were the specifications that it would be entirely in Italian?”

“Are we sure this is even a wedding ceremony? Like, does anyone here speak Italian?” Sirius was speaking in hushed whispers while he kept his eyes focused on Marlene and Dorcas. “This could be a bloody baptism for all we know.”

Remus stole a quick look at James who was paying rapt attention to the ceremony upfront. On the other side of him, Regulus was leaning in to whisper things in his ear, and occasionally James would nod in understanding.

“Hold on,” Remus scoffed, nudging James in the arm to get his attention. “Is Regulus translating what that man is saying right now?”

Lorenzo continued on at his steady pace.

“He’s translating what he can,” James responded softly. “He’s not fluent.”

“Well, switch spots with him so I can hear the translations too,” Remus implored while Sirius grabbed his hand in an attempt to recall his attention back to him. “I’m a little lost over here.”

“No way. Get your own Italian speaking boyfriend. Reg is mine.”

Remus let out a sigh of frustration before turning his attention back to Sirius. “Did you know your brother knows Italian?”

Sirius leaned forward in the chapel pew to look across Remus and James at Regulus. Regulus was watching the clergyman read from his small little red book and occasionally he would lean his head in close to James’ and murmur something to him softly.

“Of fucking course he knows Italian,” Sirius shook his head. “What the fuck.”

“Stop it,” Remus admonished quickly. “We’re in church you can’t curse like that.” Then, for good measure, he looked up at the chapel ceiling and muttered a quick apology on Sirius’ behalf. It couldn’t hurt.

“When we get married, it’s going to be in English,” Sirius shook his head at the clergyman and Remus tried to remember how to breathe. Sirius was often dramatic, he would make grandiose statements and outrageous remarks with casual ease and while Remus was

completely smitten with everything Sirius did, it was a little difficult for him to determine when Sirius was being, well, serious. He couldn't tell if this was his take on another double wedding joke or not.

"I still have to go back to school before marriage," Remus said quickly, looking at Sirius with wide eyes. "And I want dogs first. We should get a dog together before we decide to get married. And–"

Sirius interrupted him by kissing his jaw. "Oh of course. I couldn't marry anyone who didn't have at least one Ph.D. That would be ridiculous. And we'll get dogs. I want Dobermans but we can talk about that later. I'm just saying, it would also be ridiculous to assume that we're not getting married, because we are. But it doesn't have to be anytime soon, I'll wait another twenty years if you want, but one day Remus Lupin, I look forward to the moment I can call you my husband."

"Shh," Evan admonished softly from the other side of Sirius. "Some of us are trying to watch a wedding, if you don't mind."

Remus was desperately trying to control the rising blush to his cheeks while he imagined all kinds of foolish scenarios. Walking into a dinner party, *'this is Sirius, my husband.'* Going to the movie theatre, *'two tickets for me and my husband.'* He was going to pass out.

"You don't even speak Italian," Sirius grumbled.

"No. But Barty does. He's translating for me so shut it."

"What the fuck," Sirius wailed, and Remus tapped his knee against Sirius' to remind him to keep it down, and to not swear in church.

"His father made him learn," Evan explained with a large eye roll. "Barty's fucking brill. He was trying to teach Regulus for a while there too. Some of it stuck." Then he turned his attention back to the ceremony.

"I'll bet you all my millions that James cries when they kiss," Remus whispered after a few minutes.

"No way am I taking you up on that bet," Sirius shook head, smiling. "I'm fond of my new money and I'm also going to cry when they kiss. So that would be like betting against myself too."

Remus smiled too, refocusing on Marlene and Dorcas. Both of them were radiant and smiling with looks of pure joy. The air felt light and happy. He was fairly certain that neither of them knew Italian and they were standing up there, just happy to be together. The wedding ceremony took much longer than Remus expected. He didn't have a watch but they were definitely nearing the two hour mark. Peter was on the verge of falling asleep and Lily had taken it upon herself to nudge him every time his head started to bob forward on his shoulders and his eyes would flutter closed.

“Bacia la sposa,” the man said and then stopped speaking abruptly. The entire chapel was silent as Marlene and Dorcas smiled politely.

“Bacio. Bacio,” the man prompted again.

This time Marlene and Dorcas looked slightly confused, their smiles faltering slightly.

“Bacio,” he nodded, gesturing between them with his hands.

“Oh for fucks sake,” Barty grumbled. “Kiss each other,” he shouted, grinning madly.

Dorcas didn’t need any more prompting than that as she surged forward to kiss Marlene. Everyone erupted into loud cheers and clapping.

“She’s my wife! She’s my wife,” Marlene laughed giddily. “She’s my wife!”

The clergyman clapped too as they walked down the aisle hand in hand and out of the tiny chapel.

“Bellissima cerimonia! Grazie! Grazie,” Barty called to the clergyman as they filed out of the chapel and into one of the cream coloured cars waiting for them outside.

The cars drove them to a beautiful stone building that Remus knew was a reception hall.

“Regulus and his damn cars and obscure knowledge of Italian reception halls,” Sirius shook his head.

“How does he know everything about everything,” Remus asked, whispering in disbelief.

“That’s Regulus. Things always have a habit of working out for him. Not because he’s lucky, but because his sheer willpower is an unstoppable force.”

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James was proud. He only really cried twice. Once at the actual ceremony and once when Marlene and Dorcas had their first dance. It was a perfect day. Everyone was so indescribably happy it made them all light and airy.

Even though everything had happened in the last possible minute, Regulus had managed to pull a lot of strings and everything came together perfectly. There truly couldn’t have been a better wedding for Marlene or Dorcas.

James was concerned that the lack of family would be a problem but the look on both girls' faces when he asked if they wanted to wait for their mums was enough assurance for James to proceed with the wedding as planned.

Everyone had unloaded their presents from the car and they rested on the table, all stacked and wrapped neatly. Another table had a beautifully decorated white cake, but Regulus told James he was most proud of the champagne fountain.

Again, James was concerned with the lack of food, but Regulus had told him that alcohol and cake were the two reasons anyone came to a wedding anyway and no one would complain. Ultimately, he was right. No one did complain, they were all inexplicably delighted the entire afternoon.

There was no live music or a DJ, but there was a speaker system and Mary had dedicated several hours of her life over the past two days to creating the perfect wedding playlist and she played music through the speakers. The entire reception hall glittered in fairy lights and all around him his friends laughed and drank amicably. James really loved weddings.

“Do you want to dance with me James?” Regulus came by after a while to interrupt a story Peter was telling about his first year of medical school.

Marlene and Dorcas hadn’t left the dancefloor at all and Lily was dancing with Remus and laughing rather loudly, already well on her way to being drunk. He pulled her close as a slow song began to play and spun her around in dizzying circles.

“I thought you didn’t dance, Reg,” James smirked, already excusing himself from the conversation and leading them both to the dancefloor.

“You caught me. It’s my excuse to hold you in public. I just like…being near you.” He flushed.

James pulled him in close and began swaying to the music with a wide smile.

“Are you really happy, James?” It was a whispered question and Regulus looked at him with a devastating clarity as he waited for his answer.

“More than you know,” James responded instantly. “More than you know.”

Regulus’ smile was so soft and genuine James fought the urge to look away.

“I’m glad,” Regulus responded, still swaying to the music as he rested his head against james’ chest.

They stayed that way for a long while, swaying to the music and not saying anything more until Reguls broke away with a wicked glint in his eye, his mood completely changed.

“What is it,” James asked, already smiling at Regulus’ expression.

“Oh nothing,” Regulus shrugged with feigned nonchalance. “I was just thinking about how I owe you one for this morning.”

It took James a moment to catch on to his meaning. “Oh. This morning. Regulus, that was an apology of sorts, for the Marlene thing. I mean it wasn’t done with the expectation that it would be a, um, transactional…like I didn’t mean for it to come across like…”

“Okay,” Regulus interrupted, still grinning. “No, I get it. You’re saying you don’t want me to suck you off in that bathroom in the back of this place and you’d rather just stay here and eat cake.”

Even though Regulus was speaking quietly and no one was paying them any mind, James looked around quickly anyway and let out a little yelp. “N-no that’s not what I’m saying. I would actually–I want that very much. But won’t people notice we’re gone?” James felt his cheeks flush, but he felt himself also grinning shamelessly. “Since when were you the kind of person-”

“-I’ve always been that kind of person when it comes to you,” Regulus interrupted quickly. He took James by the wrist and was leading him past the dancefloor and down a tiny, secluded hallway that had a single brown door. “Besides I’m confident in my abilities. We’ll be back before anyone notices anything. And, it’s a wedding. Everyone hooks up at weddings.”

He pushed through the door and turned on the light. That brief conversation was all it took for James to be riled up, and he was on Regulus the moment the door closed behind him.

Regulus was fumbling with the lock quickly as James began kissing him everywhere and with the same hunger and passion as their first time. Regulus had him pressed against the cool, stone wall by the door and James began running his hands along Regulus’ back, pulling him impossibly close. James liked that he never had to think with Regulus. His body just knew what to do and how to respond. It was a glorious thing. He wasn’t self-conscious or nervous, when he was with Regulus, he was himself completely.

He let out a sigh that quickly turned into a groan as Regulus kissed down his neck and then began sliding his hands slowly down his body sinking lower and lower until he was on his knees in the tiny bathroom, looking up at James through his long lashes. He didn’t break eye contact as he began unbuttoning James’ trousers, letting them pool at his feet. *I’ve never been so fucking in love* , James thought dizzyingly.

He could hear the music still playing softly in the background.

“You’ll have to be quiet,” Regulus smirked and James bucked his hips impatiently at the sight of his pretty pink lips. “Give me ten minutes, tops.”

“You’re cruel,” James grinned, but he quickly gasped as Regulus took him into his mouth. Now he was worried it would be less than five minutes. “Oh fuck, oh fuck Regulus,” he breathed out, letting his head roll back against the wall.

Regulus continued his skillful ministrations, swirling his tongue and bobbing his head as James writhed and swore. He was fighting to keep his eyes open so he could take in every breathtaking detail that was Regulus. His fingers twisted in Regulus’ curls as he did his best to stay standing despite the waves of pleasure threatening to knock him to the floor.

“You’re so perfect, Regulus. You’re so beautiful, so fucking perfect,” James grunted out incoherent praises and Regulus keened at his words, looking up at him with wide eyes that began to water slightly as he took James in deeper.

James wasn't sure what he liked more. Being here, and giving himself completely over to Regulus, being completely at his will or if he liked the opposite best. Having Regulus writhe above him in pleasure, watching as Regulus gave himself completely over to James, came apart with just James' mouth.

"Reg, I'm so close," James gasped out quickly. "You're so f-fucking," James couldn't finish his thought.

Spurred on by his words, Regulus took James completely into his mouth and added his hand into the mix. All it took was the sounds of Regulus gagging slightly to push James over the edge as he came apart with shaking legs and slew of curses and praises for Regulus as he swallowed and continued to suck through James' high. He had, in fact, not lasted ten minutes. At least it was more than five.

Regulus grinned, standing to his feet, and James wrapped his arms around him and kissed him deeply.

"You're the hottest fucking person I've ever seen," Regulus groaned, when they pulled away, and then he let out a little huff. "I fucking feel like I'm going to combust whenever I look at you."

"The feeling is mutual," James grinned, pulling his trousers back up quickly.

Regulus was fixing his appearance in the mirror and James took one look at his swollen lips and spun him around to kiss him again.

"Fuck the wedding, let's just stay here," James mumbled against his lips, attempting to unbutton Regulus' shirt.

"Can't," Regulus gasped, pulling away. "They're about to cut the cake and open their wedding gifts." He laughed at the pained look on James' face. "Come on, you love this stuff. We have to go. People really will notice we're gone."

Regulus went back to fixing his hair in the mirror and James did his best to make his appearance look a little less dishevelled as well.

"Alright, back out to the people," Regulus smiled as James wrapped a hand around his waist. He went to pull the handle to the bathroom door and flung it open.

James froze as he came face to face with Sirius who was standing out in the hallway. In fact, everyone froze. Regulus stood there without speaking and Sirius had one hand still out, presumably reaching for the bathroom door handle. Sirius looked back and forth between James and Regulus, his mouth still hanging open slightly, but before anyone could say anything, Regulus slammed the bathroom door closed quickly, leaving Sirius standing alone in the hallway.

"Regulus!" James looked at him with wide eyes.

"I panicked!"

“Do you think he saw me,” James asked.

“He looked right at you. Of course he fucking saw you,” Regulus deadpanned, shaking his head.

“Well you know, it’s not like he saw us doing anything. Just, you know, go out there,” James blinked quickly.

“You first,” Regulus shot back.

James cleared his throat and stood up straighter. “Fine.”

He flung open the door to see a scowling Sirius, and he did his best to smile as he slid past him and out into the hallway. Regulus was hiding slightly, using James to do so, as he followed closely behind him.

“Finally,” Sirius muttered stepping into the bathroom. “What are you two? Bloody fucking teenagers. I have to piss so bad and now I’m traumatised. Control yourselves!”

James opened his mouth to speak, but Sirius just threw up a hand to preemptively silence him before closing the bathroom door.

Regulus rolled his eyes and James let out a little laugh which Regulus quickly echoed as they made their way back out to the others.

After the cake, Marlene tore into the presents as Dorcas smiled and thanked everyone graciously.

They both screamed at Remus and Sirius’ espresso machine. They opened all fifteen of Peter’s gifts ranging from practical houseware items they would need to a large stuffed animal of a giraffe he bought because it was cute, much to Marlene’s delight.

“You’ve lost your minds,” Marlene looked at Barty and Evan with wide eyes as she pulled out a candy bra and edible underwear and held it up for everyone to see.

Dorcas was too busy staring at the pink fuzzy handcuffs to comment.

“We brought the bachelorette party to you since you didn’t have a chance to have one,” Barty grinned while Evan laughed maniacally.

“Figured you could use it all on your honeymoon,” Evan added.

Marlene let out a loud snort as Dorcas fumbled with something inside the large wrapped bag that vibrated loudly out of view.

“You’re welcome,” Barty sang.

“Don’t worry we also bought you a lot of fancy and expensive alcohol,” Evan added. “We have manners too.”

“Yeah it’s so you can work up enough courage to try that vibrating–”

“Nope,” Dorcas cut Barty off loudly. “Thank you, both. So much.”

Marlene echoed Evan’s maniacal grin. “You two are so forgiven for holding me at gunpoint that one time.”

“Christ, Mckinnon get over it,” Barty rolled his eyes playfully.

They opened James’ and Regulus’ gift last. It was a small envelope, but Dorcas practically knocked James over when she barreled into him to hug him.

“Bora Bora, James? Really? I said that one time and you remembered?” Dorcas was laughing in sheer delight.

“It was Regulus’ idea to get you a trip.”

“Since you have to work through your actual honeymoon,” Regulus added.

“But I did suggest Bora Bora,” James smiled as Dorcas hugged him again. He remembered Dorcas talking about once when they were upstairs working on their own perspective tasks for the heist. It was her dream holiday location.

After the presents, they continued drinking well into the night, Regulus had ordered more than enough champagne for all of them, and when they felt hungry they would meander over and eat another slice of cake. Marlene had actually taken to using a fork to take individual bites out of the cake whenever it struck her fancy, much to Regulus’ and Remus’ consternation.

They all went back to their hotel rooms long after the sun had gone down, and Marlene and Dorcas promised to see them all two days for the next swap and promptly disappeared with lots of giggles which occasionally turned into shouts of laughter.

Once he and Regulus made it up to their room, James smiled, watching as Regulus began undoing his tie. They were both slightly drunk and joyously radiant.

“What are you thinking about,” Regulus murmured softly.

“Our list. First the swap with Mulciber, then Copenhagen, and then what? What do we do, Regulus? Where do we go after? The possibilities are vast and endless.”

Regulus smiled that same soft smile he gave James at the wedding when they were dancing. “I have a few ideas actually.”

“Where do we start,” James asked, walking over to kiss him softly.

“It’s a surprise,” Regulus whispered.

“And where do we end,” James asked in between kisses.

“We don’t. We just find ourselves up in the stars somewhere.”

James loved that idea so much he thought about Regulus’ words the entire night and let them carry him off to a peaceful sleep.

Chapter End Notes

The next time you see an update this fic will be finished! Yes, I am uploading the remaining chapters all at once! All the way through until the end :) So, it will take me longer to get the chapters out.

also,,,,maybe,,,next chapter,,,,bring your tissues or something,,,, okay bye <3

Chapter 34: Copenhagen

Chapter Summary

kill your darlings, as they say.

Chapter Notes

you know the phrase hurt people hurt people? well, sad people sad people. which means i'm sad and i'm about to make it everyone's problem

tw: blood, gun violence, death, graphic depictions of violence

See the end of the chapter for more notes

While their trip to Italy began with love and weddings and excitement beyond James' wildest imagination, it ended with a different type of excitement that could only be felt during an art swap.

They had to drive a little ways outside of Portofino to meet Mulciber and as the distance decreased between them and the location for the swap, James felt his nerves increase with every passing second.

Regulus definitely seemed like the worst for last kind of person. James was under the impression that he had been building the heist team up with these swaps. He started with the lowest-stakes person for the first swap and worked his way up the ladder. It was smart to do it that way. When everyone was most nervous, meet with the easiest person. Regulus planned everything with the most meticulous care; there was no doubt in James' mind that it was intentionally structured that way.

He was certain that Mulciber would put them all through their paces, he would've bet a lot of money on it. Which is why he was surprised when Mulciber didn't show up at all to the swap. Regulus wasn't.

"He's still fucking pissed at me for leaving the business," Regulus muttered. "He hates me so fucking much, but doesn't hate me enough to not do business with me. Fucking prick."

Mulciber had called just minutes before they were supposed to meet to inform Regulus that he wouldn't be in attendance.

Barty looked relieved more than anything, and James found out that it was one of Mulciber's men that had shot him all those years ago. Without Mulciber around to give the order, the odds of Barty being shot again were a lot lower.

Sirius just swore profusely when the swap was done about what a snub it was for Mulciber to no-show. He railed on and on about how pathetic Mulciber was that he couldn't meet in person. He called him a cowardly, measly, flea.

James didn't understand why this was such a big deal to Sirius. Because Mulciber wasn't there, the swap was left up to one of his men. It was a mostly silent, depersonalised swap, and even James could tell that Mulciber's stand-in was following a set checklist in his head. Walk in, verify the art's legitimacy, transfer the money. Leave.

He didn't care enough to taunt Regulus or to try and make his life harder. He collected the art, they collected the money, and they both left without incident. As far as James was concerned, it was the perfect swap.

He tried to sleep on the plane to Copenhagen, but it was only a two hour long flight and just as James found himself falling asleep, they landed in that rough and rocky way that rattles the windows and shakes the seats and makes you lurch forward so that your seatbelt has to hold you into place.

The amount of paintings they had left in their possession had dwindled down to just four. Just four paintings left to sell and then James would be thrust into a completely different phase of his life yet again. His life, and Regulus' life. Their life. It made James' heart beat deliciously fast just thinking about it. He felt a small surge of pride looking at the menial amount of works left. Even though it pained him slightly to part with the paintings they had all gone through meticulous and painstaking efforts to obtain, it was also exciting to see a visual indication of their progress. A tangible reminder of their recurring success.

Once they arrived at their hotel, James slept for several hours. He knew their time here was short. The swap was happening the next night. Sirius had told James it was because neither he nor Regulus could stand to be in the same place as Lucius Malfoy for longer than 72 hours, and James thought that was perfectly understandable.

Their shortened stay also meant that there was no time to explore the city. James woke from his morning nap to Regulus' cold hands shaking him back and forth quickly.

"James. James. Love. I hate to do this to you but you have to get up now. We have that meeting in ten minutes," he murmured softly.

James let Regulus' voice come into focus as he was pulled from sleep. Slowly, he blinked and opened his eyes, adjusting to the sunlight filtering into the room. Regulus was sitting on the edge of the bed in a dark green shirt with his curls still messily tousled from sleep.

James just took a moment to stare at him and he felt his heart skip several beats as Regulus smiled at him at first, and then looked away self consciously under his stare.

"James, what are you doing?"

“Admiring the view.”

Regulus rolled his eyes before he leaned across James and reached for something on the nightstand by the bed.

“Then you better put on your glasses so you can see me in all my glory.” Tenderly, he placed the wire framed glasses on James’ face. “Much better.”

James leaned up and kissed him quickly. “Give me ten minutes,” he sighed, rolling out of the warm bed to get ready for the day.

“You have seven now,” Regulus responded.

Seven minutes later, James found himself in another hotel room. He wasn’t sure if it was Barty’s or Sirius’ or who’s it was, but he was there, sitting on the floor, and listening to Regulus’ instructions.

“After the swap tomorrow night, you have two options,” Regulus began. “If you’ve procured flight tickets for another location, preferably one with no extradition laws, then you are free to leave. I have drivers who will ensure that you get on your flight safely. If you haven’t made any plans or arrangements, you are welcome to come back with me to London. You all still have your flats from before the heist and I recommend staying there for a short while until you figure out your next steps.”

Everyone nodded in understanding.

“No one is, under any circumstances, allowed to stay in Copenhagen after the swap. It’ll be crawling with Lucius and his men and I want you all out of here undetected and unrecognised. Is that clear?”

Everyone nodded again.

“Wonderful. You have passports, bank cards, new identities. You have new phones with everyone’s contact information. James will continue to monitor your banks accounts and the money flow to ensure that everything is running smoothly. If you find that at any point in time you have trouble accessing your funds, or you have any questions about the monetary side of things, call James. Don’t,” Regulus looked around pointedly, “say anything incriminating over the phone line. I’d prefer that you schedule a time to meet in person.”

“Can we call you whenever we want, Regulus?” Marlene asked with a wide grin, her hand in the air.

“Is there a reason you would need to call me?”

“Yeah, I’ll miss you. I hate this entire meeting. It feels like this is the last time that we’re all going to be together like this and it makes me sad. You all are my family now. Genuinely. I love each and every one of you and I’ve seen you all everyday. To not do that anymore… what if we all pooled our money together and lived in a giant mansion somewhere? That way we’d never be apart.”

“No way,” Barty snorted. “I mean sorry, yeah. But no way.”

Marlene flipped him off quickly.

“Well, we’re all going to be friends forever,” Lily said with certainty. “And it’s not like we don’t have the money to visit each other all the time. I’ll visit all the time.”

“Yeah,” Peter nodded quickly. “Me too.”

“Same,” James grinned from where he was sitting. “Don’t worry Marls, you couldn’t get rid of me even if you tried. And I’ll bring Regulus everywhere so you won’t even have time to miss him before we come visit you and Dorcas.”

Dorcas smiled warmly. “We would like that very much James.”

“Alright,” Regulus cut back in. “Tomorrow we meet with Lucius. He’s bringing someone with him. Tom Riddle. I don’t know a lot about him, but we need to be prepared for anything. I want the cars running the entire time, I want those of you who are extra hands to be ready to run in if I need you. No guns on safety. I want them ready to shoot. No screw ups.” His voice was dark and heavy.

“Jesus, you’re freaking me out a little,” Mary let out a short laugh. “Is all of this really necessary.”

“Yes.” Regulus, Sirius, Barty, and Evan all spoke simultaneously.

James once again felt the unease settle in his stomach, but after three swaps, he was getting better at suppressing it.

Regulus then spent some time discussing the nature of the next swap. He was always serious when discussing work related matters. But, this somehow seemed more urgent. James knew Lucius, he had met Lucius, and he had witnessed first hand how Lucius put Regulus on edge. It seemed like a powder keg waiting to explode between the two of them, all that was missing was the match.

“Alright so is there anyone who won’t be joining us on the flight back to England tomorrow night,” Regulus asked, looking around the room quickly. “I need to know now so I can plan accordingly.”

James took a look around. No one said a word.

“Okay, so everyone will be coming back together then. Wonderful,” Regulus nodded curtly. “If you have any questions feel free to talk to me now, otherwise, by all means, you are free to go. The last swap is tomorrow. We’ll meet at two in the morning.”

Everyone began standing up.

“If I can just add one last thing,” Regulus cleared his throat. “I just want to say that it had been a privilege and an honour to conduct this heist with all of you. Each of you are brilliant individuals and I couldn’t have asked for a better team.”

James felt his heart turn into a little puddle. He loved Regulus so much, he had no idea what to do with himself.

Marlene surged forward and for a minute James was certain that she was going to plant another fat kiss right on Regulus' cheek, but he sidestepped her quickly.

"That's alright Mckinnon. The dramatics aren't necessary," Regulus said calmly, but he was fighting a smile.

"You keep trying to hide the fact that we're friends Regulus, but I'll wear you down one day. I know you love me," Marlene grinned.

"You're all free to leave," Regulus repeated again to the group. "See you tomorrow."

Everyone left with quiet mutterings to one another. James was glad they were all going back to England together. It was good to all leave together and arrive back home together. Starting and ending in the same place. Dispersing and saying goodbye to all of his friends from Copenhagen would be too sad.

"Hey," Regulus came up to him and James closed the laptop he was using to monitor all the monetary transactions. He stood up from the hotel room floor preparing to leave and Regulus wrapped an arm around him.

James could never get enough of this Regulus. The Regulus who would cling to him and dance with him in public. The Regulus who would laugh at all his stupid jokes and slip his hand into James'. He always showed his affection with casualty, but James knew. He knew because they had come from secret meetings and dark rooms, he knew because Sirius would still blink in surprise every time Regulus made the first advance, he knew because Regulus, despite all his best efforts, would always blush just slightly whenever he kissed him. He knew that Regulus loved him, and it was a big fucking deal.

"Sirius and I are going to go for coffee. At the place across the street with the yellow door. I think we should be back in an hour or so."

Ever since Amsterdam, Regulus had made painstaking efforts to tell James exactly where he was going and how long he'd be gone. He still hadn't told James where he went in Amsterdam though, no matter how many times James pressed. All he managed to get out of Regulus was that it was a surprise and it was something that he had to show James in person, after the heist. The mystery was eating him alive.

"Alright. Love you, have fun," James murmured, giving him a quick kiss.

"I think, after the wedding, you two should both stay an arms length away from each other at all times," Sirius grumbled, glaring at both of them.

"Like you and Remus aren't the most hands-on people I've ever met," Regulus returned quickly. "You didn't even see anything. I could give the complete rundown about how I had his d–"

“No,” Sirius wailed with wide eyes. “No. Shut up.” He put his hands over his ears as Regulus grinned wickedly. James could only laugh.

“You defiler,” Sirius shook his head at James. “You defiled my baby brother!”

“Well he was the one doing the defiling if we’re being honest–”

“No! No,” Sirius wailed again. “Forget everything. This conversation is over, we’re leaving.” Sirius glanced pointedly at Regulus before they headed towards the door.

“Like you don’t defile Remus. My best friend,” James shouted out after them with a huff as the door thudded closed.

—---

Regulus waited patiently inside the café for Sirius to finish smoking outside. This was something new they were trying. Coffee. They could get coffee and talk. It was still hard, and a little stilted at times, and they both had so much more to work through before they could get back to a semblance of normal, but they were trying. Things couldn’t be fixed over one cup of coffee, but maybe they could be fixed over thirty or seventy or one hundred.

One hundred cups of coffee with Sirius was such a nice thought. It was hope. It was the promise of progress, of togetherness. Things between them weren’t perfect, they weren’t even close, but they had one hundred cups of coffee to drink together. Maybe even more. Regulus was grateful for that.

“Sorry,” Sirius pulled out his chair and sat down.

Their black coffee produced warm steam from their white ceramic mugs and it smelled tantalisingly of comfort and caffeine.

Regulus just shook his head. For a while, neither of them spoke. There was so much to say and yet neither of them could bring themselves to speak a single word at all.

“After the swap tomorrow, Remus is going to move into my flat with me for a while. Until we can find a place that’s ours,” Sirius began. He always defaulted to talking about Remus when he could think of nothing else. Maybe it was because Remus was always on his mind. James was certainly always on Regulus’.

“Uncle Alphard’s flat,” Regulus nodded.

“He gave it to me.”

“Giant flat for one person.”

“Well, Remus will be there. It’ll be two people soon enough.”

Regulus just hummed in response.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“You moving in with Remus? No. Good for you.”

“No, I meant uncle Alphard.”

Regulus took a long sip from his coffee, letting the slightly bitter taste calm him. James was always telling him to stop hiding away at the slight hint of confrontation or uncomfortability. He was working on being more open, it was something he could do for James. For Sirius.

“What’s there to talk about?”

Well, so much for being open.

“Regulus,” Sirius sighed, frowning slightly. “Come on now. Isn’t that why we’re doing this? To talk?”

Regulus shrugged. “Talk about what? The fact that we both called him Uncle Alphard? The fact that I looked up to him and loved him just as much as you did and he didn’t even mention me as an afterthought in his will? In his estate? He left everything to you, which was fine. It wasn’t about the money. But–” Regulus took a sharp breath in. “I was there too. I needed love and support too. So either he died hating me for staying, or he just didn’t care enough about me. Not like he did you, that’s for sure.”

Sirius winced slightly.

“It’s not your fault,” Regulus added quickly.

“I think he always thought I would get you out,” Sirius whispered quietly. “That if he left anything to you, Walburga and Orion would get their hands on it somehow. But if he left it all with me, I could get you out, and we’d have a place to be safe, and money to support the both of us. I think he always thought I would get you out.”

Oh.

Regulus screwed his eyes closed tightly, before he let out a deep sigh.

“I failed him. And you. I’m really sorry about that Regulus,” Sirius whispered.

“You didn’t. You didn’t though,” Regulus said quickly. “Fuck, Sirius. I never thought about it like that. I didn’t– I didn’t think. I wasn’t thinking. You didn’t fail me. You could never fail me.”

Sirius blinked at Regulus’ words.

“There was actually a long stretch of time, where you were the only one who never failed me, you know? I’m very grateful for that. Uncle Alphard’s flat– your flat is very nice. I’m glad you have it.”

“Yeah?” Sirius spoke with a careful softness.

“Yeah. You needed it more than I did anyway,” Regulus smiled, trying to lighten the conversation slightly.

“Fuck off,” Sirius laughed.

They both fell into silence again.

“This is nice,” Sirius said again, attempting to fill the silence. “I like knowing that we can do this. That you’ll show up and I’ll show up and that we’ll…”

“Try,” Regulus finished for him.

“Yeah.”

More silence. The waitress refilled Regulus’ cup.

“Marlene and Dorcas’ wedding was nice.”

“It was,” Regulus nodded in agreement.

“I didn’t know you liked weddings so much,” Sirius fidgeted nervously with a sugar packet in his fingers.

“I didn’t like Black family weddings for obvious reasons,” Regulus snorted. “Two people making a commitment to love each other forever in front of all their loved ones though? It’s nice. It feels…official.”

“Would you consider coming to my wedding?” It was a delicate question. Sirius weaving together the words like gossamer.

“You’re getting married,” Regulus gasped with wide eyes. “What the fuck is in the air?”

“No. No,” Sirius smiled, shaking his head quickly. “Not for a while anyway. But one day, I’d like to.”

Regulus took a moment to return to his original state of calm, the caffeine working to put his heartbeat on overdrive.

“I would love to be there, if you want me there Sirius,” Regulus answered honestly.

Sirius nodded slowly. He turned the sugar packet over and over again in his hands.

“This is what I mean,” he whispered. “When I say that this is nice. After I left, I didn’t think that you would ever be at my wedding. I had to make peace with losing you while I was still actively trying to find you at the same time. I never thought, in a million years, that you would want to go.”

For some God-awful reason Regulus felt his bottom lip begin to tremble. “I didn’t think you would ever want me there, Sirius. At your wedding, in your life. You don’t even call

Walburga and Orion mum and dad," Regulus shrugged trying to keep his voice level. "For a long time, I thought I was included in that, but I'm starting to see that I was wrong."

"You were never included in that. You were never, ever included in that," Sirius said fiercely. "I'm glad to be your brother. I'm glad that you're my family, okay? We're brothers. We are."

Regulus rubbed his eyes with the back of his hand quickly. "Yeah. Okay. Of course we are. Of course we are."

Sirius smiled. "This is the part where you invite me to your wedding too, Regulus. It's a good brotherly gesture."

"I'm not having a wedding," Regulus sniffed quickly and Sirius gave him a pointed look in return. "When the time comes, James and I are eloping."

"Yeah fucking right. James would never go for that. Besides you just said declaring your love in front of everyone you love is so official so excuse me if I don't fucking buy that for one second."

"Okay," Regulus smiled too. "You are invited to the wedding. The hypothetical wedding that will not take place for a very long time."

"Please, I think you'll be married before me."

"Wanna bet on that?"

"No, because that feels like betting on one of our downfalls," Sirius shook his head quickly. "It'll happen when it's right."

They talked for a little while more before they went to leave.

"Should we talk about Lucius and Tom and the swap tomorrow," Sirius added as almost an afterthought.

Regulus was tired of talking about Lucius and Tom. There was nothing left to say that hadn't already been said. There was nothing left to do but face the music. It wasn't anything that Regulus couldn't handle.

"I think it's probably best to quit while we're ahead," Regulus shook his head, walking towards the door.

"Yeah, you're probably right."

"Sirius?"

"Yeah?"

"This was nice."

Sirius nodded. “This was nice.”

—---

James expected the swap location to be at another cramped, vacant, and rundown restaurant. He was expecting flickering lights and damp alleyways and grey concrete. He was not expecting to meet at a small yet austere looking building.

Regulus turned around from the passenger seat to glance at James as if he could read his mind. “It’s Lucius’ Goddamn private museum. It’s only open to the public on Wednesdays. He’s the world’s biggest twat.”

James nodded as Regulus rolled his eyes.

The cars began to idle and everyone began their well established routines.

James carried two of the paintings in and Sirius carried the other two. They both followed quickly and quietly behind Regulus under the cover of darkness.

He was carrying the portrait of Van Eyck’s wife under one arm and the other was a Cézanne still life. Three skulls stacked upon one another in a slurry of brushstrokes. Regulus had called it a memento mori. It served to highlight the fleeting nature of life, the direct Latin translation meaning “ *remember that you have to die* .” James didn’t care much at all for momento mori paintings. They were unsettling.

They walked in, following behind Regulus, trusting that he knew exactly where to go. They left Evan by the door like they always did. James could hear his footsteps echo on the marble white floors.

Here, it was open and grey and cold. Here, it was pristine and untouched. It wasn’t lived in, used, or worn like the previous restaurants the other swaps had been in. The lobby of the private museum was immense with high ceilings and large marble columns jutting up from the floors. The room seemed to swallow them whole. James couldn’t imagine anyone stepping foot in here before. Everything was so clean, so white, so shiny and lacquered. No scuffs, no dirt, no dust. Bleached. Sterile. Unlivable.

James followed Sirius’ lead and stacked the paintings up against the marble columns carefully. So far there was no sign of Lucius. James eyed the skulls in the painting warily.

They waited.

And waited.

Barty rolled his eyes in annoyance.

Then all at once, thunderous footsteps descended from the marble stairs in front of them. James watched a group of people begin their descent. Lucius and his men had been upstairs this entire time.

If this surprised Regulus, he certainly didn't indicate it.

There were a lot of them. Lucius, James could pick out instantly thanks to stark hair, there was another man with him too, walking slightly ahead of him. He had dark hair and a sharp jaw. Everything about him seemed too sharp, piercing. His eyes moved across all of them like daggers. It was clear he was trying to draw blood.

Then, four men followed behind them. James stared at the one in the back with sandy coloured hair. He had an angular face and for some reason, James had the uncanny feeling that they had met before.

They were outnumbered. Yet again, Regulus didn't seem bothered by this fact, but James knew with utmost certainty that he hadn't planned on being outnumbered. It was only Regulus, Sirius, Barty and himself. That was four to their six. Five if you counted Evan, but he was so far away from them at the back entrance to the museum that James thought it hardly mattered.

He felt panic strike him so suddenly and fiercely he fought the urge to aim his gun directly at Lucius.

"You," Lucius barked at one of his men, "Look at them. Take your time. Regulus and I are going to have a little chat."

Quickly, a man scuttled over to the paintings. He had a great deal more equipment than anyone else from the previous swaps as he began with the Van Eyck portrait.

"Regulus, this is Tom Riddle," Lucius gave a smile that made James' stomach turn.

He wasn't sure why. He knew this would be the most dangerous swap. Regulus saved the worst for last. Sirius and Barty were here. Everything would be fine. They just needed to get in, get out, and then the possibilities could begin.

He fought to be here. Regulus didn't want him to come on this swap because Lucius knew him. Lucius knew about him and Regulus. Lucius knew too much and Regulus knew too little about Tom Riddle, and so Regulus wanted James as far away from here as possible. So, James had to fight. He had to fight to be next to Regulus; he had to fight to go on the final swap. Evan Barty and Sirius thought it would be a bad idea to switch the plans at the last minute. Sirius was worried that Regulus would be worried about James the entire time if he couldn't see him, physically. So James was here. He needed to prove that he could handle it, that Regulus made the right decision in bringing him. He needed to quell his fear, and quickly.

"I've heard a lot about you Regulus," Tom spoke in a calculated and measured tone. It turned James' blood to ice. "I have to admit, I was almost surprised to see how you managed to escape the police back in America."

Regulus remained silent.

“And the heist is successful and so are the swaps. You’re down to four paintings. You’ve made millions. You’ve made history,” Tom continued. “I need someone like that. Someone who can take big risks and get out of them unscathed. Someone with a mind like yours, to see what others can’t, that’s very useful to me. Your capacity to put together and recruit a well working team. That’s useful to me. I’m here to make you a job offer.”

The man examining the paintings scuttled quickly to one of the works Sirius brought in.

Lucius arched an eyebrow. “Come now. Don’t be rude, Regulus. You know it’s impolite to ignore someone when they are speaking to you.”

Something was wrong. James could tell something was wrong.

He looked at Lucius’ men who all still wore the same apathetic expressions. He watched the one man examine the paintings with a steady hand. He glanced at Sirius out of the corner of his eyes. Everything seemed normal. But James felt it, in his bones, that something wasn’t right.

“I have more money and more power than you’d ever know what to do with,” Tom’s eyes glinted steadily. “You’d make history once a month if you align yourself with me. Work for me.”

Regulus was glancing at the three other men standing behind Lucius and Tom. The air was acidic and unbreathable.

“Can I think about it,” Regulus asked at last. “Give me a month.”

Lucius scoffed at his bluntness.

“Two weeks.”

Tom shook his head. His eyes glinted with vile delight. “I’m afraid I can’t do that.”

The same measured and cold tone. James was too afraid to move to look at Barty. Too afraid to turn his head. Something was terribly wrong. He could tell. But he didn’t know what it was.

The man examining the paintings quickly scrambled back behind Lucius and Tom.

“I’ll do it,” Regulus said quickly and James felt his heart plummet in his chest. “I’ll do it, I’ll work for you.”

James bit his lip harshly to keep from crying out. He could taste blood.

Lucius looked at Tom with a pleased expression on his face. “See? I told you he would come around. There was no need for all that talk before. I knew he would. He’s like his father.”

But Tom wasn’t looking at Lucius. Tom was staring at Regulus intently, dissecting him with his stare, pulling him apart piece by piece.

“No you won’t,” Tom said at last, still not breaking his stare. “You’re smarter than I gave you credit for Regulus Black, but you’re still not smarter than me.”

A look of realisation dawned on Lucius’ face and he turned around quickly. “Tom I don’t think–”

“Silence,” Tom seethed and James could have sworn that he saw Lucius flinch. “You may leave, Lucius.”

Lucius began walking away quickly.

“Lucius,” Regulus called after him. His voice was still level. It was still calm, but James saw it. It was small. It lasted not even a millisecond, but James saw it. The slight tremor in Regulus’ hand.

Lucius stopped for a moment. His back was towards all of them. “I’ll be in the back if you need me,” he called out in a soft tone, his voice echoing in the cavernous and empty museum. It was directed at Tom.

“How did you know,” Tom asked, still staring at Regulus.

Everyone was statuesque. Not a single hair on anyone’s head moved.

Crackling electricity all around. What was wrong? What was wrong?

“Tom, don’t do this. If you do this, no one will work with you ever again,” Regulus said calmly. “Take the paintings and go. Or take me at my word when I say I will do it. I will work for you. Or take both.”

“See, I think people will take me seriously. All it takes is one story from me about how you brought an INTERPOL agent to an art swap. All it takes is one little story from Carrow over here about how he heard your men bragging about creating fakes to sell as real paintings in a pub in Berlin.”

James felt like deadweight. Like lead was weighing down his feet. That’s where he knew the man in the back from. Berlin. He was the one in the pub, reading a book by the door. He was there. He was listening.

“Those two things combined are enough to cast a pretty dark shadow on your reputation, don’t you think? It calls your credibility into question. Some people might even say that I didn’t have a choice,” Tom smiled. “I had to send a message.”

James felt the bile rise in the back of his throat. He was going to be sick. He wanted to raise his gun, to protect Regulus and shoot, but he knew it would cause more harm than good. Even with Lucius gone, they were still outnumbered and his aim would have to be not only perfect, but lethal.

Regulus knew what he was doing. Regulus would get them all out of this.

“The bags,” Regulus said shortly.

“Someone send some fucking people in here right now,” Barty whispered quickly into his earpiece. He wasn’t as good at keeping his voice calm. “Evan.”

“There are no bags of cash. You didn’t have your men bring them. It was never a swap. It was always a set up.”

James heard Sirius and Barty raise their guns, and Regulus spun around quickly, but to James, time slowed down an interminable amount. He didn’t have to say it, James could see it in his eyes. His grey eyes, wild and frantic and calling out to him:

‘ *James. Run* .’

Then, the sickening sounds of bullets raining down all around them. James didn’t know where they were coming from, he didn’t know who had shot first, all he knew was that he surged forward to grab Regulus’ wrist so that he could drag them both out of there as quickly as possible, and that for a few moments, he actually believed that he could do it.

He felt Regulus’ cool and slender wrist in his grasp, he pulled hard as they both surged forward a few paces, running in long strides, and then he felt the sharp sting of nothingness as the wind was knocked out his lungs.

Regulus had toppled to the ground, and pulled James with him. For a minute James let himself believe that Regulus had just tripped. That he had fallen in his haste to run.

“Reg, get up. Come on Regulus. We have to go,” James’ voice came out high-strung and panicked as he rose to his feet, desperately trying to pull Regulus up with him.

All around them there were shouts and yelling and footsteps echoing with bullets firing. People were running out towards the back. James wasn’t focused on anything but Regulus though. “Regulus come on, get up,” James practically hoisted him up. And that's when he saw it. The blood. Bright red spurts of blood already smearing on the white marble floor.

Regulus wheezed and let out a sharp cry of pain at being moved. James too yelped at the noise, feeling as if his heart had been ripped out of his chest. As gently as he could, he moved Regulus back to the floor.

“Regulus, oh fuck,” he sank to his knees. All around him the bullets fired, they were ricocheting off the marble, sending bits of stone and shrapnel flying. There was yelling and screaming and the roar of blood in James’ ears as he tried to use his body to shield Regulus’ from any stray bullets flying their way. He didn’t know what was happening around him. He didn’t care.

Regulus had gone entirely pale and he sucked in a shaky breath.

“Peter,” James screamed into the earpiece. He felt the force of panic deep in his lungs. “Peter,” he tried again.

“Regulus, you were hit. Where were you hit?”

He looked around for Sirius or Barty or anyone. There was a body. One of Tom's men, laying on the floor. James could still hear the commotion. It was further away, coming from the back. It seemed that Sirius and Barty had followed the other men out as they tried to run. James and Regulus were entirely alone.

And then James felt it, the sickly warm and thick liquid pooling at his knees and drenching his trousers. Then the sharp metallic scent of blood. Too much blood.

Regulus was wearing black he couldn't see where the blood was coming from. The entry wound wouldn't bleed as much. Minimal bleeding. The exit wound would. That's where the blood was coming from. The exit wound. As gently as he could James turned Regulus over slightly, so that he was partially laying on his side, and James saw the gaping wound, bleeding from Regulus' back. As quickly as he could James used one of his hands to apply pressure in an attempt to stop the profuse bleeding. He remembered that from Peter's lesson. Minimise the bleeding.

Regulus cried out in pain again.

"I'm sorry," James said shakily as he kept one hand underneath Regulus. "I'm sorry."

"James, James," Regulus reached a shaky hand up to touch his face softly. He was laying on his back, James' hand underneath him, trying to plug the bleeding. Regulus' face was turned towards James, but he looked far away. He was there but he wasn't really there. Maybe the blood loss had made him delirious.

"Peter will be here any minute. Tell me what to do. How do I stop the bleeding? What do I do?"

Regulus' breathing was shallow and raspy. His lips trembled with the pain and effort it took to speak.

Blood so dark it was almost black.

"It's not going," he took in another shallow breath. James did his best not to wince at the rattling and gurgling noise every inhale and exhale made. "To matter."

James' hands were shaking as he did his best to stroke Regulus' face comfortingly. He needed to stay calm for Regulus. He needed to keep it together for Regulus. Regulus let out a sick, wet cough.

He called for Peter again, so loudly that his throat felt as if he swallowed gravel. It was in the earpiece but James was sure anyone would have been able to hear it.

"Don't say that Regulus. You're fine. You're going to be fine. Everything is going to be okay, do you hear me? Everything is going to be fine."

"James," Regulus rasped, his chest rising and falling rapidly. He was so limp, so weak and frail. He was wearing the same expression he had that day in the bath with the Degas. A

childlike quality in him that only seemed to come out when he was in pain, when he was afraid.

“Don’t speak, it’s hurting you. You’re in pain. Peter can help. He’ll make it better.”

James stared in horror as blood began trickling down the corner of Regulus’ mouth. “Regulus, just tell me what to do! How do I make it better?”

“Just hold me,” Regulus’ voice cracked. “Please.”

James shifted quickly. He was trying to ignore all the blood. There was so much blood. As carefully as he could, he moved Regulus so that he was laying in his lap and he wrapped his arms around him. He winced as Regulus cried out in pain again.

James brushed the curls out of his face, but he was smearing blood on his forehead. Regulus’ blood was all over James’ hand that he had used to try to stop the bleeding. There was so much blood. “Regulus. I love you so much. It’s going to be fine. You’re going to be fine.”

Regulus shook as he let out a violent cough. Droplets of blood sprayed out of his mouth and a crimson streak stained the left corner.

“The bullet,” he rasped. “Or parts of it, hit my lung.”

There was more gurgling and Regulus’ eyes looked far away. In a sheer moment of panic James shook him quickly.

“My lungs are filling up with blood.”

“Oh God, Regulus. What do I do? Tell me what to do. Tell me how to help.”

James was shaking. Where was Peter? Where was everyone?

“In a minute, I won’t be able to breathe. Okay?” Regulus started crying softly and James carefully wiped the tears from his face as they fell. “I don’t want you to be scared. Don’t be scared, alright?” James couldn’t tell if Regulus was speaking to him or to himself. “Don’t be scared.”

Another violent round of coughs. James did his best to wipe the blood from his mouth, but it just smeared across his face in dark red streaks.

Regulus let his eyes flutter closed, his breathing coming out slower, but still incredibly shallow. Thin and weak.

“No. No. Regulus open your eyes. Open them,” James couldn’t help the panic in his voice, the sheer terror that had gripped him. He knew Peter would help. Peter would be here any second and he could save Regulus. And everything would be fine. Regulus just needed to stay awake a little longer.

Gently, James felt Regulus’ hand hit his arm a few times softly and it took a second before James realised that Regulus was trying to hand him something.

He felt the cold metal of the ring before he looked at it. A silver snake with emerald green eyes.

“No. Regulus. No, I can't take this. Stop it. Stop it,” James said, frantically trying to give it back to him.

“It doesn’t hurt anymore,” was all Regulus managed to say. His head lolling limply to one side.

James squeezed him a little tighter.

Regulus wasn’t a religious man. He didn’t know what came after death, but he liked the idea of returning to the stars. They were all made of cosmos and stardust and if he was lucky, maybe, just maybe, he could go back there. To that place where he was before he was him.

It didn’t hurt anymore. He tried to assure James. He knew it was a bad sign. He knew that there was nothing anyone could do now to save him. The sharp lapping flames of pain had subsided to a dull ache in his lungs every time he tried to inhale. He did his best not to gasp for air– for James’ sake. He didn’t want to scare him, but he couldn’t breathe. He was drowning in his own blood. Dying from the inside out. Dying. He was dying. At least it didn’t hurt anymore.

He hadn’t lived a long life. It was relatively short, in the grand scheme of things, but he wasn’t angry. He had experienced the love of a million lifetimes in the short amount of time he had known James. He had met the sun and known its warmth. It wasn’t a bad life. It was the best one he could’ve asked for. He was loved and he had loved in return. What a glorious and indelible thing to be a part of.

“It’s okay,” James was holding him and rocking. “You’re going to be okay. Everything is going to be okay. You’re okay. I’m okay. We’re okay. Everything is going to be fine.”

And maybe it was because James was James or maybe it was because Regulus could feel James’ arms wrapped around him so tightly that all the fragmented pieces of himself had come together again. All the parts of Regulus that had been careening out of control his entire life were glued together again and he was whole. He was loved, and he knew he could take that love with him, wherever he went. So, Regulus believed him. Regulus chose to believe. In James’ embrace, everything was okay. He was okay.

“Hey James,” he managed quietly. It was too much effort to speak now, and he was tired. So tired. He just needed to close his eyes and rest. Just for a minute. His tongue was heavy and the metallic taste of iron was overwhelming. “I love you. That’s all.”

Shuddering breath in. And out. In. And out. In–

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It wasn't the amount of blood that had accumulated all over the floor that convinced James that Regulus was dead.

Or the fact that Regulus had stopped the gurgling and wheezing noises several minutes ago as he drifted into cruel stillness.

It wasn't Barty's tear stained and blood splattered face. Or Evan's desperate attempts to shake Regulus awake. It wasn't even Peter's sorrowful look upon checking for a pulse. Or his frantic attempts to do CPR anyway.

It was Sirius' agonised wails as he pleaded and called out to a God he never believed in to spare his brother. To bring him back. "I just got him back," Sirius screamed. "I just got him back. Please. Don't do this. Please bring him back. I just got him back."

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James doesn't remember much else. He doesn't want to remember much else.

There are bursts, of course. Little pockets of time that will forever be etched into his brain.

He remembers not wanting to let go of Regulus. He remembers Peter and Barty attempting to pry him out of his arms.

He remembers someone, Remus maybe, helping him to his feet.

He remembers the sound of Sirius' sobs.

He remembers looking back at the scene behind him to see bodies. Shoes of men he didn't recognize.

And he remembers looking out at the thick red blood on the marble floors and nonsensically, being reminded yet again, of Rothko.

In the end it didn't matter who fired the bullet that killed Regulus Black. Barty and Evan and Sirius slaughtered them all. It was a complete masacre. Six men dead. Tom and Lucius included. Six men and one star.

One star gone from existence.

A devastating thing to witness.

An irrevocable thing to lose.

Chapter End Notes

uhhh would it help if i told you all that i also cried? maybe it was just me who cried

also these final chapters are shorter just btw <3

Chapter 35: Sorrow

Chapter Summary

A careful examination of grief

James knows a few things. He knows that they are back in England. He knows that they are in Sirius' flat. He knows that everyone is staying there. He knows that there are 313,783 little abstract designs etched into the wallpaper in front of him. He knows that Regulus is dead.

He does not know what day it is. Or how long it's been. Or even what happened that night. Or what's happening now. These are all things that hurt too much to think about.

They are in England. They are in Sirius' flat. There are 313,783 abstract designs on the wall. Regulus is dead.

He keeps it dark and cold in the room that he's in. There is no sunlight and no noise. Sometimes, when he feels up to it, he'll trace the wallpaper designs with his fingers. He'll feel the rough texture of the paper beneath his fingertips and he'll count the designs one by one in his head until he'd see how his hand trembled and then it would be too much.

Mostly, he sat on the edge of the bed, and stared at the wall. He felt his heartbeat rhythmically and he went over the things he knew in his head.

They are in England. They are in Sirius' flat. There are 313,783 abstract designs on the wall. Regulus is dead.

He didn't like to sleep anymore. Sleeping meant dreaming.

The first time he had slept, he thought nothing of it. He was exhausted and drained and he fell asleep quickly and he dreamed of so many beautiful and lovely things. He dreamt of him and Regulus by the ocean, laughing as the salt water wind blew their hair wildly. He dreamt of Regulus running in an apple orchard standing on his tiptoes as he tried to reach the best apple of the bunch that was just out of his grasp. He dreamt of the Louvre. He dreamt of all these places and things and when he woke in the middle of the night with the trace of a smile on his face, he rolled over to tell Regulus about all the adventures they had gone on only to find the bed empty.

James can't feel that devastating loss again. It pulled all the air out of his lungs, so he couldn't even scream. All he could do was cry. So, James doesn't sleep anymore, as best he can.

Time is passing too. That's another thing James adds to the running list in his head. He doesn't know what day it is or how much time has passed, but he's aware that it's passing.

And as time passes, James is able to add more and more to the list of things that he knows.

He knows that they are in England. They are in Sirius' flat. There are 313,783 abstract designs on the wall. Regulus is dead. Time is passing.

He knows that people visit him in his dark room. They sit with him and talk to him, even though James doesn't ever speak back. They talk anyway.

He knows that Sirius has Remus and that he's thankful for that. Sirius has Remus and he has Marlene.

Marlene makes sure that he drinks water and eats a little every day. Marlene lays out fresh clothes that James doesn't change into. Marlene sits up in his room for long periods of time without ever saying a word.

Remus comes in sometimes too, when Sirius is asleep. When Sirius isn't crying out for a brother he no longer has. But when Remus sits with him, all James does is cry.

He cries in great heaving sobs that wrack his body, sobs that leave his lips chapped and his mind numb. And Remus holds him and whispers things to him that James doesn't hear and can't comprehend.

James remembers carving a pumpkin once. He remembers cutting the top off and taking a large metal spoon to scoop out everything inside the pumpkin. Scraping out all the strings and the seeds in slopping wet chunks. He scraped and scraped until it was completely emptied out. No insides. *Guts* , as his mum had called it.

He felt a lot like that pumpkin. Like someone had gone in and scraped everything out. His insides were sore and bruised and they ached, like they had been clawed at with a giant metal spoon. He was hollow, no longer comprised of the things that made James, James.

Time passes and he adds more and more to the list of things he knows.

He knows Barty and Evan took care of everything. The bodies, the cleanup, the disposal. Peter hadn't come when James called because he was scared of the gunshots. He was waiting for the bullets to subside. Regulus said it wouldn't have mattered anyway. Sirius thought that they had managed to make it out. He saw James and Regulus run. He didn't see him fall. It had been eight days since Regulus died.

He was eating more. Marlene had even managed to get him in the shower. The warm water was comforting and James kept turning the temperature hotter and hotter so the water droplets stung like nettle on his skin. He stared at the shower wall until the water ran cold, and then he went back to sitting on the edge of the bed.

On the tenth day after Regulus had died, Mary brought him a cup of tea. James managed to take one sip before dissolving into tears. It would never taste the same again. He watched for the sun to rise and fall.

On the eleventh day after Regulus had died, Marlene laid out a suit on the bed.

“The funeral’s tomorrow. If you feel up to going. No one will blame you if you don’t want to go though,” she said softly.

James didn’t respond.

Marlene stayed with him for a few hours, not saying anything else. Occasionally, she would rest her head on his shoulder or wrap an arm around him to let him know that she was there. She left sometime after the sun had gone down.

On the twelfth day after Regulus had died, James took a shower. He combed his hair, and he put on a suit.

He collects people’s sad smiles and their sorrowful eyes and their reassuring touches and he lets them build up and overflow. He puts them in the pocket of his hollow heart and he feels their weight pull him down. Now that James had stepped out of his room and back out into the daylight, he felt strange. He felt less like someone in mourning and more like someone waiting for their lover to return.

When was Regulus coming back? When would he get here? James was waiting.

Mary was making breakfast over the stove and Marlene and Dorcas were talking quietly on the couch over cups of tea.

When Lily saw James emerge from the bedroom, she walked over from the kitchen where she was helping Mary to give him a hug. She had been in the room a few times over the last few days. She was the one who would leave folded paper swans on the nightstand. James remembered her telling him that it was good to do something with her hands, to keep herself busy.

“I lost my dad a few years ago,” Lily said softly. “It doesn’t ever get any easier, James. But you do get stronger. You get a little bit stronger everyday.”

He wished people wouldn’t worry about him so much. He wished that he could pull himself together so that everyone could focus on Sirius who had lost a brother. They didn’t need to worry about him. They had other things to worry about.

“I’m sorry about your dad, Lily.”

James’ voice came out hoarse and rough from lack of use. It was almost a whisper even though he didn’t mean for it to be.

Marlene and Dorcas had stopped their conversation to look at him with surprise.

Lily smiled at him. James added it to the collection.

“Mary’s making breakfast before we leave. Will you eat some toast?”

He nodded.

Then he wandered around the flat. He was still hollow. Still empty. He felt as if he were floating. Totally hollow and transparent, a ghost. He knocked on another closed door when he heard Remus' voice and waited as he heard scuffling.

"James," Remus looked at him with a mixture of sorrow and relief. "You're dressed. You're up."

Just past Remus, James could see Sirius, sitting on the bed, slumped over and in clothes that were wrinkled and well worn.

Remus followed James' gaze. "It's a bad day, today. He was doing better for a moment. Well, as good as can be expected. He made plans and arrangements for the funeral. But today," he shook his head. "Today's a bad day."

James nodded slowly. If Sirius could hear that they were talking about him, he didn't indicate it.

"His bad day happens to be on one of my better ones," James heard himself say. His voice was still gravelly. "Do you mind?"

Remus shook his head and stood aside, allowing James to walk into the room.

He sat next to Sirius and felt the bed dip underneath his weight. The room was only illuminated by a lamp which cast everything in long shadows.

"If you hate it we can leave," James spoke.

Sirius looked a lot like how James felt. Hollow. His eyes were tired and sunken and he had dark purple rings underneath them. His hair was tangled and his lips were chapped and raw.

"We can leave whenever you want and we can go get cherry ice cream and we can drive until we run out of gas and then eat more cherry ice cream."

James remembers Sirius told him once that cherry ice cream was his favourite.

James wrapped an arm around him. It always seemed to James that he and Sirius had an understanding between one another. It was easier to relate to Sirius, and to understand him. They were similar in a lot of ways, and now they had both lost the one person who meant the most to them. There was no deeper understanding than loss.

Sirius sank into him and began to shake with heavy, silent sobs. "He's gone." He said. "He's gone." Over and over again.

"I know. I know," James whispered. There was nothing he could say. No comfort he could provide that would make anything better.

"He was my brother. I have no one now."

"You have me," James said quickly. "You have me and Remus. We're not going anywhere."

They stayed like that for a while until Sirius' tears had subsided.

"The world is never going to be quite right ever again, is it?"

James thought about how the colours were already duller, how he couldn't stand the smell of Earl Grey tea, how everything was a hollow imitation of itself.

"No," James answered honestly. "No, it's never going to be quite right ever again."

Sirius did decide to get up and get ready for the funeral. While he was getting ready, James ate his toast. It didn't taste like anything anyway.

He learned that Barty and Evan had left three days ago. That they said they would be back for the funeral today, but otherwise, no one had any idea where they were or what they were doing.

He learned that Peter sulked around guiltily, feeling partially responsible and cowardly that he couldn't run into the line of fire. James didn't blame him though. He didn't have the energy to be mad, even if he wanted to be. Anger wouldn't bring Regulus back.

The graveyard where Regulus was at was nice. There was a clergyman there. James didn't really understand, because neither Regulus or Sirius were religious, but James supposed Sirius had his reasons. The clergyman was going to say a few words before they put Regulus in the ground.

Sirius sat very close to Remus and James suspected Remus was acting as a physical support for him, working to keep Sirius sitting upright. Sirius had Remus and James had Marlene.

Marlene who was sitting next to him and holding his hand tightly. Regulus' silver snake ring was digging into her skin but she didn't seem to mind and James was thankful that he had someone to hold on to. Dorcas was on the other side of her.

Peter sat a few rows behind everyone. Mary and Lily were on the other side of the aisle, in the grey chairs directly across from them. James wondered if anyone else was thinking about the wedding that had happened so soon before. How this felt a little reminiscent of that. How did they get so lost from that moment? How did they stray so far?

Barty and Evan made good on their promise to attend the funeral. They came bursting into their seats late, stumbling, drunk, and using each other for support. Red swollen eyes, stubbly faces, crooked ties. And James felt a new wave of grief strike him all over again because Sirius wasn't the only one who had lost a brother that night. Barty and Evan had too.

James could hardly bear to look at the shiny lacquered black coffin that sat at the front, waiting to be lowered. It was closed. James could hardly fathom that Regulus' body was inside. The thing about losing Regulus was that it had been so senseless. He hadn't died for anything. He was taken just because he could be. James didn't know what to do with that. He tried to tell himself that Regulus went out in a blaze of glory, dying only after he stole enough art to alter history forever. Dying only after he went to Amsterdam, and Paris, and Berlin, and Portofino. Dying only after he ensured that the heist, his heist, would be talked about in every

introduction to art class in existence. But the truth was, his death was senseless, and cold, and he died not completing the heist at all. The final swap, unsuccessful. The last step in his plan, unfinished.

James was pulled from his thoughts just in time to hear the final words of the clergyman.

“If there is one thing I know with absolute certainty, it is that we will never truly get over great losses. We absorb them, we keep them with us, and those losses carve us into different, often kinder, people. If we let them.”

Twelve days after Regulus’ death, they lowered him into the ground and covered him with dirt. His body was in the Earth, but his soul was up in the stars. James made a note to plant some purple flowers by his grave.

“What do you think it’s like,” Sirius asked, staring at the rectangular mound of fresh dirt in the uprooted Earth. “Dying?”

James tried to swallow the lump in his throat. It was taking up too much room for him to speak. “I don’t know,” he finally managed, once he could form words again, once he had enough strength to push them out.

“I’d like to think that it was quicker and easier than falling asleep. Do you think that’s true?” His voice was tight and thin. He had already loosened his tie and the sleeves of his shirt had dirt on them from where he grabbed handfuls of Earth to place on Regulus’ grave.

It was a nice thought. James wishes death was that easy. He wishes that more than anything for Regulus, that it was quick and easy. But he knows it wasn’t. He can still hear that low gurgle and rattle echo in his ears. That horrific sound that came deep from Regulus’ lungs as he fought, as he struggled to breathe. He thought of the panicked coughing and the wheezing and the pain his lungs must’ve been in as they fought to get oxygen, and he knew it wasn’t easy. It was nothing at all like falling asleep.

But it was a nice thought. It was a thought that James would’ve really liked to believe, if the roles had been reversed. If Sirius was the one who heard Regulus in his last moments and not James.

“I think it’s like that too. Peaceful,” James heard himself say. He didn’t speak again for two days.

Seventeen days after Regulus’ death, James was having another bad day. More like a bad day that had turned into a bad night. He only knew it was nighttime because it was pitch black when he stormed out of the flat.

The absence of Regulus was everywhere, and James found himself only wanting to speak to him. When Mary said something funny that had managed to make a few people laugh, James looked for Regulus to see if he was smiling. When Remus had come out in an ugly green jumper, James wanted to talk to Regulus about it immediately. There was no tea in bed, no passionate stories about the characters in a book he was reading, no quiet murmurs of love. James needed to talk to Regulus.

Outside, the cool air whipped around harshly; it was colder and colder every day. Grey concrete, smattering of stars.

“Regulus,” James screamed nonsensically. It was the first time he had said his name out loud in two weeks. “Regulus!”

There were too many fucking stars in thy sky. How could he find him when they all looked the same and burned bright and unrelenting?

Fuck. Fuck .

James was sniffling again. He was staring up at all of the stars as they blurred in his watery vision. He was lost. Regulus was lost.

“Regulus,” he said much more quietly, his eyes scanning the vast expanse of sky. “Where are you?”

“You know you should really get a jacket. It’s cold out here,” a voice from the shadows caused James to snap his head forward.

Evan was standing up against the stone building smoking as Barty took a large swallow from a silver flask.

James walked over to them with heavy trodden feet. Quickly, he wiped his eyes with the back of his hands.

“Are you two staying at the flat tonight?”

The flat had become a commune. Everyone was living there. Except Barty and Evan who came and went at their will. Sometimes here, sometimes not.

“Yeah, bit of a bad night for us,” Barty grimmanced.

“Bit of a bad life,” Evan mumbled. “It’s probably better for us to be around people.”

“Me too,” James sighed, leaning up against the wall next to them.

Evan offered him a cigarette. James didn’t smoke, he never had, but he took it anyway. He needed something to do with his hands, like Lily said. He liked the way it burned when he inhaled.

“So you’re screaming at the sky tonight,” Barty nudged him, handing him a silver flask.

Both of them were drunk, slurring their words, and even in the dark James could see their eyes were glassy. Glassy or wet with tears.

“Yeah. I’m just so…I’m just so. Everything reminds me of him and I need to talk to him and i can’t and I’m just so fucking angry. I’m so angry because he’s lost and I can’t find his stupid fucking star and I can’t talk to him and he was here. He was just here,” James’ voice strained. “He was just here talking about coffee and Rembrandt and now he’s gone.”

He took a large gulp from the flask before handing it back to Barty who gave it to Evan.

“It’s good that you’re angry. It means that you’re not as numb as you thought,” Evan said quietly. James had never seen either of them this sombre. There were no jokes or sly remarks or glinting eyes. There were no grins or high fives or wild gestures. “What do you call it?” Evan paused for a moment. “Hollow. You’re not hollow if you’re angry.”

James didn’t know why, but he felt slightly better at that. It was true. Being angry was better than being nothing. Maybe Lily was right. Maybe he was getting just a little bit stronger every day. He now had the energy to be angry.

“Yeah,” Barty nodded. “Evan and I though… we drink to feel numb. You want to feel it all. We don’t want to feel a Goddamn thing.”

“I,” James started. Taking the flask back from Barty. “I’m really sorry. We haven’t talked since…that night. And I just…I know you both lost a brother too. He really loved you both. A lot.”

Evan let in a sharp breath and Barty let out a wet laugh.

“When I was younger, I had this absolute dick for a father,” Barty began, not looking at anyone, but at the stone brick building in front of them. “One day I decided that I was sick of putting up with his abuse so that night, I worked up enough courage to sneak out of the house and I went to Regulus’. I climbed a tree to tap on his window. His parents, they were worse than mine. If they found me there Regulus would have been dead, but he didn’t care. He let me sleep in his bed and wear his clothes and he snuck in extra food from the kitchen for me. He did that for three days.” Barty shook his head. “In those days, with parents like Walburga and Orion, every little move felt like life or death. But Regulus did it. Without complaint. Without fear. Or maybe with a great deal of fear, but he never showed it. I never did go back to live with my dad. I went to work with men who were a lot worse than my father, but they were never worse to me than he was. Always worse to other people.”

They were all silent for a while. James subbed out his cigarette on the bottom of his shoe. The air was heavy and thick despite the colder temperatures.

“You know, the first time I asked about Regulus’ family, he told me about you two,” James said into the night. “Barty and Evan are fine, thanks for asking. I believe those were the exact words out of his mouth.”

Barty and Evan let out a little laugh and James tried to breath as the image of Regulus in the car flashed across his mind.

“That sounds like him,” Evan rubbed his nose.

After that it was as if a floodgate had been opened. Stories about Regulus poured out from all three of them as they drank from the flask and smoked.

James smiled and cried hearing stories from university about how Regulus had blackmailed a professor into letting Barty pass a physics class, or how he bailed Barty and Evan out of jail

twice in one week and on the third time, he made them spend the night there. James told them stories he had of Regulus too. Moments where he nearly killed them by swerving off the road, the time he yelled at a security guard in a museum for standing too close to a painting, the time Regulus had tried to smother James in his sleep for letting Marlene stay in their hotel room.

James had all these little pieces and fragments of Regulus that he loved more than anything in the world. But Barty had different pieces and so did Evan, and even though it hurt, even though every time someone said his name, James felt his heart wrench, they were helping each other to put the pieces together. Story by story, they were helping each other complete the picture of Regulus.

They talked. They cried. They drank. They smoked.

"Regulus' star is right there by the way," Barty said after a while, pointing up at the sky. "See those four really bright stars all in the same area? They make a weird looking square shape."

James followed his point to look back up at the sky.

"It's the one on the bottom right. It's the Leo constellation, and it's the heart of the lion."

James continued to stare. He couldn't see a fucking lion at all.

"Oh fucks sake. It's the brightest one in that part of the sky. Come on."

"Give him a minute Barty, there's a lot of fucking stars up there," Evan chided.

"Oh. It's that one," James exclaimed with a point. "The one that's sort of blueish?"

"Exactly," Barty nodded.

Relief washed over him. He found Regulus. He had found him.

"Thank you," James whispered, not taking his eyes off the star. "Thank you."

"Sure. Evan and I are going in. You going to be okay out here by yourself," Barty asked, collecting Evan from where he was leaning against the wall.

"I'll be okay," James murmured.

"Alright then."

Barty didn't hover. He didn't give any sympathetic smiles for James to collect or any looks that would weigh him down.

"Barty," James called, finally pulling his eyes away from Regulus' star. He wanted to say thank you for that night. For cleaning everything up, for taking care of everything, for getting them all back to England. For all of it. But he wasn't quite sure how. "Thank you. For–" James trailed off but Barty seemed to understand.

“Evan and I have been doing this a long time. We knew what to do. You just never think it’ll be one of your own.”

Evan mumbled something incoherently in Barty’s ear, and Barty gave him a small nod. “Goodnight, James.”

“Night.”

James waited for the sound of their footsteps to fade. He waited until there was complete silence and he waited until he was sure he was alone.

Then, he slid his back down the wall until he was seated on the cold concrete. He looked up at the sky until he could find Regulus’ star, until he could find Regulus.

‘We just find ourselves up in the stars somewhere.’

“Hey Reg,” James spoke softly. “You fucking idiot.”

He let out a sob.

“I miss you. We had a funeral for you. It was nice. You would’ve liked it I think.”

The star glittered and twinkled in response.

“I just wanted to talk to you I guess. Even though it hurts. I love you, and,” his voice wavered, “I wish you’d come home. Your star looks lovely. You’re lovely.”

James couldn’t see through his tears. That was something he was used to these days.

“I’ll um, I’ll talk to you soon.”

Twenty three days after Regulus’ death, James made a vow to himself.

Regulus always wanted to be remembered after death. He had done that through the heist. But he had done it through James too. James made a vow to remember.

Even when it hurt too much to breathe.

Even when it felt like a punishment.

James made a vow to remember.

And God, did he remember.

—---

Sirius doesn't know how to properly describe how it feels when your worst fear comes true. The closest he can get is that sickening lurch you get in your stomach when you think that there is one more step in a staircase then there really is. That feeling of being in free fall, with no one there to catch you. Perpetual terror.

He never stops thinking about that moment. He saw Regulus turn around. James had him. He thought James had him. If he had just looked back. If he had only turned away instead of surging forward to find Lucius. His rage had blinded him. It had clouded his judgement. And now he had to face the consequences.

The thought that he had failed his brother. The thought that he had failed Regulus was the hardest part. The thing Sirius had spent his entire life working against had happened anyway. All those years he spent apart from Regulus, all those times he was cruel to him in an attempt to save him, all those months spent not speaking, they were all in vain. Regulus had died anyway and he made sure that Sirius was there when it happened.

That was the other thing that made Sirius' stomach turn, and in fact, he had been sick numerous times. Working himself up into such a panicked frenzy, Remus barely had time to get him to the toilet, barely had time to hold his hair back. Sirius ricocheted between utter devastation at his loss and fury like he'd never known. If Regulus had stopped the heist. If Regulus had fucking listened to him. He would be here. He would be alive.

On his worse days, Sirius just wishes that Regulus would have left him out of everything entirely. Then, at the very least, he wouldn't have known the cruelty of almost having a brother again only for him to be taken away. He could've died in the heist, but left Sirius so far removed, maybe it would've hurt less. Maybe.

On his best days, he was just sad. Entirely too sad to name.

Remus was there all the time. It was the only thing keeping Sirius semi-sane. The dependability of Remus Lupin. Right by his side, soothing him with words, and warm embraces, helping him with the funeral arrangements.

He didn't know that the last conversation he had with Regulus would be his last one ever. There was a heavy irony in that. Before, when things were bad, Sirius always assumed whatever conversation he had with Regulus would be his last. Whatever conversation that had ended in venom and contempt would be the note they left things on forever. But then, things got better. In fact, Sirius wasn't aware just how much better things had gotten because they happened so gradually but things had gotten so good that he actually expected to have several thousand more conversations with Regulus in the future. And now he couldn't even have one.

Not a real one anyway.

There was a version of Regulus that Sirius carried with him in his head. One who would make quipps about his outfit or his eyeliner or the way he pronounced certain words. He would have conversations with that Regulus in his head, but imagining what he might say wasn't anything compared to hearing his actual voice.

Sirius did his best to take what the clergyman said to heart. He wanted his grief to carve him into a kinder person. He knew grief could make him cold. He knew it could make him callous and cruel and dead to the world, but he didn't want it to. He wanted to be something better.

So he leaned away from his initial tendency to rage at everyone around him, to blame them for perpetuating the heist, the criminal activity. Because he was just as guilty, he was more guilty than anyone else. The perpetual feeling of falling.

In the days after the funeral, James established himself as a constant and reliable presence as well. He wasn't sure how the routine started but one night he came in with a pint of cherry ice cream and stories about Regulus and now they did it nearly every night.

It started when cherry ice cream was the only thing Sirius could stand to eat some days. Days when James talked about Regulus more than he asked about him. But as time passed, Sirius added to the conversation. He wanted to contribute his own stories of Regulus too.

He remembers how James said that he wasn't going anywhere. The day of the funeral James promised that he would be there.

Sirius wasn't entirely sure what it was, but he knew a lot about what James was thinking without him having to say anything at all. The ice cream was his way of saying he was there.

So the days passed and Sirius and James sat on the couch in his flat, side by side, eating cherry ice cream and watching movies that Regulus loved as a child.

He never asked what James was doing when he slipped out at night for thirty minutes. He never commented on his tear stained face when he returned back inside.

They just sat and ate cherry ice cream and talked when they wanted too. Their friendship was formed in loss, but it was nourishing for their souls all the same.

"Oh, I've been meaning to tell you," Sirius spoke, and James fluttered his eyelids open.

They were a tangle of limbs on the couch, the dark flat illuminated only by the television screen that was turned down to a dismally low volume. Remus was asleep in the arm chair.

James told Sirius it was easier to sleep when he was out in the open with other people around, with the television running, with noise. Sirius had Remus. He had Remus to wake him from the dreams and Remus to hold him through the tears and to talk to him in the silent hours of the night.

James didn't have that anymore.

So, Sirius slept on the couch with him and Remus slept in the chair or some variation of that. But it was always all three of them, all together, all in the same room. Most of the time, it worked out that at least one of them was awake at any given moment, which was comforting to know as well.

"Hmm, what was that," James asked sleepily, his glasses crooked on his face.

“I have another story,” Sirius smiled watching the television flicker. “It involves Regulus and I and a horrible ugly little Christmas present that came in the form of a lamp from our cousin. I had actually forgotten all about it until I saw it in the house in New Hampshire.”

Sirius continued telling the story even when he knew James had fallen asleep. He was telling the story for James, but he was also telling the story for himself as well. It helped, talking about Regulus out loud, putting more of him out into the world. He wouldn’t mind telling the story again tomorrow when James was more awake. He would tell thousands of stories about Regulus in place of the thousands of conversations he could’ve had with Regulus, and on his very best days, Sirius walks to the café and drinks a cup of black coffee and talks to the Regulus in his head about all sorts of things. Even when he feels like he’s in perpetual freefall.

Chapter 36: Growing

Chapter Summary

James completes a friendship tour

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Somewhere between thirty and fifty days after Regulus' death everyone returned to their lives. Their new lives, where the world wasn't the same, but radically different in large and small ways. James can't listen to music without thinking of Regulus. That's a small difference. Sometimes it's nice to think of him, sometimes it hurts more than he can stand. Sleeping in an empty bed, which James hasn't been able to do yet, that's a large difference. Sitting at a table in the kitchen without him there seems like both a large and small difference. Giving up all the plans they had made together, that's a crushing difference.

When everyone was living at Sirius' flat it was better. There was noise and movement and constant chatter. It helped. No one needed to work and they could order as much food as they wanted when they didn't feel like cooking because they had the money to spend. They lived like hermits, but James always made sure to go out every night for at least thirty minutes to talk to Regulus.

Peter was the first to leave. He wasn't the same after that night, always scared, jumping at the sound of cabinets closing and of doors slamming. He was quieter than ever and walked around like everyone hated him even when James had assured him profusely that they didn't. Well, he didn't. James heard that Barty and Evan had yelled at him for the better part of an hour before Remus stepped in and put a stop to it.

After Peter left, Mary and Lily left. They promised to stay close by and to visit all the time, but they were ready to move on too. To resume a life that they had put on pause. James didn't blame them, he was happy for them. They got to move on and start the life they imagined themselves living after the heist, but James was stuck. He knew he wouldn't be able to get that. That possibility of moving on. He would never move on from Regulus Black. But that was okay. He didn't want too.

Marlene and Dorcas were the next to leave. There were a lot of tears from both Marlene and James. They had already tried to leave once before, but Marlene couldn't do it. They had made it as far as the street before Marlene and Dorcas turned around and came back.

"I just can't leave you yet," Marlene sniffled, throwing her arms around James when he opened the door.

The second time around it was different. Two nights before, James had laughed. Sirius had made some joke at Barty's expense and it made James nearly double over and choke on his water. That kind of laugh.

It was the first time he had laughed like that since Regulus had died.

He knew that, and by the look that Marlene was giving him, she knew it too. Two days later, she was on a plane with Dorcas headed to Italy. They had no house there, no plans, and no knowledge of the Italian language, but they both said they would figure it out. They had the money and they wanted to live there so they would make it happen.

Surprisingly, for their come and go nature, Barty and Evan were the last two people to leave. They would stay for dinner most nights, or sleep in the flat when they didn't feel like leaving. On their worst days, they stayed glued to James and Sirius and even Remus. They said being around other people helped their self-destructive tendencies, talking helped them feel less alone.

"We just wanted to let you know that Barty and I are leaving for Las Vegas next week," Evan said, walking in the door when Remus answered. 42 days after Regulus' death.

James heard the clattering of dishes come from Sirius in the kitchen.

"You're leaving," Sirius asked, coming out into view.

"Ah, yeah. It's warmer there and it's busy and loud and bright. It'll be good for us," Evan nodded assuredly.

"Are you going to miss us?" Barty smiled.

Barty was smiling again, but it wasn't quite the same either. His eyes weren't as bright, he never smiled for long. It was almost as if he was afraid to be happy. Afraid to smile in a world without Regulus.

"Of course he is. We all are. You're family," James said.

"Family," Barty rolled that word over in his mouth.

"You'll come back to see us though, right," Sirius asked, peering at them both.

"Careful Sirius, I might get the impression that you actually like us," Barty shook his head.

"I do, despite my better judgement," Sirius grumbled. "You have all these stories about Regulus, you knew him when I didn't. I knew him when you didn't and when we're together. When we're all together like this with our stories and memories of him, he just seems a little more…whole. That's all."

"Yeah," Evan said softly. "I know what you mean."

"We'll come visit," Barty answered firmly. "Just try to keep us away."

“But you have to come visit us in Vegas too. After we get settled and know all the best places to go,” Evan added. “We’ll have…fun,” he trailed off, a sad look in his eye.

That night, they all got rip-roaring drunk to celebrate. The next week, Barty and Evan were gone.

James stayed with Remus and Sirius for a long time. He didn’t have any plans and they didn’t mind in the slightest. He stayed through the cold of winter. He stayed when Remus started classes again at University. He spent hours and hours with Sirius looking at every motorbike under the sun until they found the perfect one.

They baked, they laughed, they cried, and cried some more. Remus made lattes nearly every morning. Delicious, soul-soothing lattes.

But healing wasn’t linear. There were still nights where Sirius would stay in the shower for hours at a time, and James would pretend that he couldn’t hear the crying coming from under the door. Nights where Remus would shake James awake from the couch when he was calling out for Regulus. Healing wasn’t linear, and missing Regulus never got any easier, but James was getting stronger. They all were.

When Sirius and Remus started looking for new flats to move into, James decided to call Mary. He called everyone frequently, he liked hearing everyone’s voices. Sirius and Remus were moving on, they were ready to begin the life they had planned for themselves. Before Regulus.

Six months after Regulus’ death, James packed up his things from Sirius’ flat and hugged his dear friends goodbye.

“You can stay James. Please stay. You can live with us forever, really,” Remus urged, squeezing him tight.

“Yeah, we’re looking at flats with a spare room for you anyway,” Sirius added emphatically.

“I’m just going to stay with Mary for a little while,” James smiled. “She’s not even thirty minutes away from here. We’ll meet for lunch and dinner all the time. But you two need time alone, and I need to do something…something different. A change of pace.”

Sirius gave him a hug too. “You’re leaving me to be a house husband all by myself,” he groaned. “I liked it so much better when we were both house husbands and Remus went out into the world and used his beautiful beautiful mind to get a degree while we did dishes and cleaned the flat–”

“-And rode around recklessly on a motorbike and baked an unnecessary amount and somehow managed to break the couch and the clock in the bedroom and the floor lamp.”

“Oi, we replaced everything we broke,” Sirius scoffed.

“Eventually,” James added with a laugh.

They all looked at each other for a few moments, before Remus hugged him again.

“Alight. Bye James. Call me as soon as you get to Mary’s or I’ll call her myself.”

“Alright. I will,” James breathed.

“I love you,” Remus’ voice cracked slightly.

“I’m going to see you next week for lunch, Lupin,” James smiled. “But I love you. Very much. You too Sirius. Take care of eachother.”

James didn’t call a car right away. He went to the side of the building where he had talked to Barty and Evan that night, where he had gone every night since without fail.

“Hey Reg,” he whispered, looking up at the sky. “You look particularly radiant tonight.” He smiled up at him.

“I’m going to Mary’s tonight. You already know that though, because I told you yesterday. Anyway. I’ve been thinking about some things. About bravery, mostly. You always used to think I was the brave one, I remember you saying that. I remember you would always ask if you could borrow some of my bravery and I would let you,” James let out a small, quiet laugh. “I would give it all to you if I could. But the thing is, you were just as brave as I was. More brave than I was. I never really told you that, and I don’t think you ever knew that. But you were. You were incredibly brave. To live the life you lived, to be raised the way you were, and to still find joy in the little things, in purple flowers and Warhol, and violin solos, that was so incredibly brave of you. It’s been hard for me to go out into the world and to find the joy in the little things these days, but I’m trying. I’m trying to be brave for you.”

James let in a shaky breath.

“I hope you don’t mind if I borrow some of your bravery from time to time. That’s all.”

The star shimmered its blue-white light.

“Love you. I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

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Mary’s house was lovely. It was open and spacious and there were various modern art pieces expertly placed with careful precision all around. James spent a lot of time in front of them, trying to think of what Regulus would say about each one. He twisted the snake ring on his finger absentmindedly as Mary gave him the grand tour.

“This is where Lily is staying. She’s still at the studio but she’ll be back in an hour or so,” Mary smiled.

Lily was staying with Mary while she was waiting on an offer to go through on a house.

“And this is the kitchen,” Mary sang.

“Very lovely. Very impressive,” James sang out his praises. The kitchen was the most important part of the house for Mary.

“Stainless steel, new appliances, a pasta arm! I have a pasta arm!”

James smiled. “It’s a very nice pasta arm.”

James’ time at Mary’s was healing too. He met Mary’s brother who was a very busy doctor and the funniest person James had ever known. They spent time together when he wasn’t at work and James listened as he told him entertaining stories of his hell years, also known as his med student years.

He followed Mary to work and watched as she and Lily did restorations. They had bought their own studio and started their own business with the money from the heist. James sat there for long stretches of time as they worked on wealthy clients' water damaged and time weathered paintings.

Their steady hands and the strong smell of turpentine provided a sense of comfort and peace and the white walls of their studio were pristine and glistening. James enjoyed looking at all the numerous paintings in various states of repair.

They all went out to dinner with Remus and Sirius and group called Marlene and Dorcas.

James worked when he could. He monitored the accounts, the financial statements, the transactions for everyone. He talked to Barty and Evan about updates, things in the news, what the police did and didn’t know.

There were rewards out now. Large, multi million dollar awards for any information even remotely regarding the stolen paintings. Anything that could lead to the crime being solved, promised monetary gain, but as far as Barty and Evan could tell, no one knew anything.

James was worried that Mulciber or Avery or someone would turn them in for the money. It wasn’t a lot compared to the millions James knew they had, but Lucius turned Regulus in to Tom. Anything could happen.

Barty and Evan assured him that they would never do that. Regulus was dead, but Sirius wasn’t. And neither were they. The news about the deaths of Lucius and Tom had made its way around. Barty said all kinds of rumours were circulating. Rumours that Regulus had managed to kill all six men before going down. Rumours that Sirius was stepping up and into the family business after all. Rumours that Regulus’ death was faked. Regardless of all the gossip, one thing was certain, Lucius and Tom were gone and Regulus had something to do with it. Barty said that fact alone would keep everyone afraid enough to never bother them again.

James didn’t know about Frank or Pandora or Alice. Sirius always skirted around those conversations when people tried to bring them up. James just had to trust that Sirius would handle it, if it was a problem. Barty or Evan would handle it, if it was a problem.

It was at Mary's where Lily encouraged him to think about the future. His future. Just his future. The new one he would have to build and make alone.

James wasn't ready to do that yet.

He took long walks with Mary at night, and she always left him a little but early so he could talk to Regulus.

They threw a housewarming party for Lily when she finally moved into her new home.

Using Regulus' bravery, James got stronger, but healing wasn't linear.

He had gone to an auction one night with Mary and Lily. They had a Rubens painting there. Lily's dream Rubens. It was a portrait of his wife most likely, a woman with vibrant orange hair, white frilly collar, and pearl earrings in the shape of tear drops. She had rosy cheeks and a semblance of a playful smile, and Lily was on a mission to outbid every man, woman, and especially man in the place for it.

James thought he could handle it. He put on his suit, he walked through the doors and stared at the men and the women in their best clothes, he tried to drink the champagne they were passing out. He even managed to make it to his seat, but when Lily asked him if he'd like to hold the paddle, since he was the only one who had actually been to an auction before, he had to excuse himself entirely.

He splashed water on his face and stared at himself in the bathroom mirror. The fluorescent lights were too bright, the memories were too much. Regulus' soft smile. Lucius. His hand on James' leg. His bright eyes, full of excitement. The shot Marilyn.

He stayed in the bathroom until he heard the bustle of people coming out from the auction. Then, he pried open the door and found Lily and Mary in the sea of people exiting the auction house.

Lily had bought the Rubens. She thanked James profusely for helping with the monetary side of things and he promised to keep a very watchful eye on the accounts until the sale was finalised.

He didn't sleep that night. He didn't trust himself not to dream of Regulus. Regulus, alive and well and laughing.

Time continued to pass.

James had lunch with Peter once. He was a hard man to keep in touch with, to track down. James wishes more than anything that Peter would stop letting the guilt eat him alive. They were all partially responsible in one way or the other for what happened. If James had been a little quicker, if he had fired his gun, if he had been smart enough to know it was a set up.

If.

If.

If.

None of that mattered. At the end of the day, Regulus was still dead. All the if's in the world couldn't change that.

James learned at lunch that Peter was back to practising medicine. He opened his own private practice that was wildly successful. James was glad to hear it. He had also met a girl. Another doctor, who had kind brown eyes and a dazzling smile. James said he was also glad to hear that. Peter deserved to find someone who made him happy.

Peter asked James what his plans were. James said he didn't have any, other than seeing his friends. That was as much as he could deal with, at the moment.

Peter said that was understandable.

Peter didn't like to talk about Regulus. He avoided anything remotely related to him and flinched a little everytime James said his name. So James had lunch with Peter once, and he texted him every once in a while, but James had the feeling that he reminded Peter of a part of his life that he really wanted to forget.

He left Mary's house feeling lighter, a little bit stronger, and ready for the next stop on his friend tour.

Italy.

Marlene and Dorcas met him at the airport as soon as he landed. Marlene practically knocked him over, jumping into his arms.

"Dorcas and I have so much to show you, so many places to take you. There's this little shop that sells prints I think you'd love– oh and this little restaurant makes the best fucking parmigiana di melanzane you'll ever eat. Oh! And," Marlene was talking a mile a minute, interrupting herself as she felt around her pockets. "Here, Dorcas and I got this for you." She smiled brightly, pulling him along through the airport by his arm.

"How was your flight, James? Everything all right," Dorcas asked in a softer, and calmer tone, but she was smiling as well.

"Everything was fine," James nodded. Holding the small white box Marlene had gifted him in one hand, his bags in the other. "No complaints."

"You look good," Dorcas nodded. "Glad you're here."

"And he's staying forever, right James? You're staying forever. Because once you see what it's really like here, you'll never want to go anywhere else."

James laughed. “I’m staying for a little while. I promised Barty and Evan I’d go see them sometime soon. In a few weeks maybe. But I’m sure I’ll be back here soon.”

In the car, on the way to their house, Dorcas drove and Marlene urged James to open his gift. It was a small silver necklace, a little coin sized pendant, with a constellation on it. A constellation James was very familiar with at this point. The Regulus star the most prominently etched.

“We got silver. To match your ring,” Marlene said softly.

“It’s perfect,” James murmured, already putting it on. “Thank you, both of you.”

Marlene and Dorcas were both taking Italian classes three times a week. They were determined to master the language within the year. Their house was beautiful, it wasn’t lavishly large or ornate, but it was perfect for the both of them, and it was close to the water.

They took James to tiny restaurants for breakfast and to fountains they made wishes in. They took him to the beach and to get gelato, the real kind, not the touristy kind, and they took him to movies playing in the town square. James laughed more there than he had in a long time. He went out, he felt the sun on his skin and he appreciated the little things life had to offer. The accordion player on the street, the waves crashing against the shore, the clear open sky at night where Regulus was easily visible.

“Oh my God, James,” Marlene gasped one night, standing quickly to her feet. She was slurring slightly. They had spent all day drinking limoncello. “I can’t believe I haven’t even shown you. You’ve been here for two weeks and you haven’t seen it in person,” Marlene ran to her bedroom.

“No, Marls. Babe, not tonight please,” Dorcas called out after her. “It’s almost two in the morning!”

Marlene however, was not deterred. Instead, she emerged with a large smile on her face and brandished a very pink, very expensive looking, electric guitar.

“I know, I know, it’s even better in person,” she admired it.

“Oh my God,” James breathed out, his eyes wide. She had done it. She had her hot pink guitar. “Play for us! Play for us! Play for us,” James chanted, much to Dorcas’ disapproval.

“Alright,” Marlene grinned. “Alright if you insist.” She began plugging her guitar into the amps.

“Oh God,” Dorcas muttered. “You asked for it.”

James was on the edge of his seat. He was ready to hear Marlene absolutely shred. She certainly looked the part of an insanely good electric guitarist. Heavy smudged eyeliner, long blonde hair cut into wavy choppy layers, dark nail polish.

“This one, is for you James,” Marlene nodded determinedly.

She placed her fingers on the frets, and then began playing the slowest and roughest version of Twinkle Twinkle Little Star he had ever heard.

“She’s been taking lessons for months,” Dorcas muttered conspiratorily.

It was painfully slow, there was no rhythm and she had to restart several times. James was trying his absolute best to hold in his laughter.

When Marlene was finished, he made sure to clap extra loud and extra enthusiastically. He even threw in a couple whistles for good measure as Marlene took her bows.

“Thank you, thank you very much,” Marlene strummed some very discordant chords that vibrated through the amplifier. “I’ll be here all week!”

James went to Italian classes with Marlene and Dorcas. He helped Dorcas cook, he slept in the room they made for him alone. He danced around the house with Marlene as he helped her clean.

He learned that Marlene was having the time of her life spending all of the money they had earned. She bought expensive shoes and fancy fish no one knew how to cook and unnecessary trinkets she saw from store windows.

Dorcas was spending her time investing some of their money and monitoring their returns. It was a well balanced union.

It was in Italy that James learned Remus and Sirius had moved into their new place and bought a dog. A big, black dog they had fallen in love with at the pound.

“You’re a dogfather now James,” Sirius sang over the phone. “Get it? Like Godfather, but better. Oh! Oh listen, he wants to say hi.”

James held the phone away from his ear as the sound of loud, wet dog sniffles came through.

It was in Italy where Barty and Evan fell off the face of the Earth for two weeks before they reemerged with a cryptic text message of a picture from a newspaper about two high profile INTERPOL agents stepping down from their positions. Frank Longbottom and Pandora Lovegood.

It was a small article, but with the news that they were in charge of investigating the Braxton Museum Art Heist, it made the second page.

“Barty what did you do,” Marlene yelled into the phone.

“Jesus fuck woman, do you know what time it is here? Lower your voice. We didn’t do anything,” Barty grumbled. Marlene had him on speaker as she, James, and Dorcas sat around the kitchen table.

“You went MIA for two weeks and then come back with this news? We don’t believe you.”

“Tell her the incidents were unrelated,” James heard Evan mumble in the background.

“Rosier, fuck off,” Marlene snapped.

“Okay, we really didn’t do anything. It was mostly Sirius. He told Frank about Regulus. Wrote him a letter, just said that he was dead. Didn’t say anything else. Well Frankie boy takes it as a threat or something. More like a ‘you’re next situation’ and his wife is pregnant. That’s where Evan and I went, to look into their backgrounds. They’re having a baby, so he stepped down, to keep his family safe. Good on him. Pandora took more convincing. Evan and I had to leave a cow tongue on her doorstep, but she got the idea after that.”

“A cow tongue,” James echoed. “Jesus Christ.”

“They don’t know shit,” Barty continued. “But they won’t be a problem anymore either.”

That was good enough for James. He didn’t need to hear anymore than that.

“James, get your ass over to Vegas,” Evan called from the background. “We promise it’s so much more interesting than Italy.”

“I’ll be there in two weeks,” James responded quickly.

“Don’t steal him from us, he’s a real peach unlike you two,” Marlene taunted.

“Same time next week, McKinnon,” Barty questioned.

“She wouldn’t miss your weekly calls for the world,” Dorcas chimed in.

Italy was good for James. Marlene and Dorcas were good for James. Dorcas’ polite and quiet conversation. Her steady patience and guidance and wisdom were soothing to James’ bruised heart.

Every beat still beat for Regulus.

James was thoroughly convinced that Regulus was it. Regulus was his one great love. He knew he wouldn’t get another one. He didn’t want another one. He had his time, and he was so grateful for it, and he knew that nothing would ever be that spectacular again.

He told Dorcas this one night after Marlene had gone to bed and she nodded along, listening carefully. When he had finished she was quiet for a long time before she spoke.

“I do think Regulus was your one James. But you still have so much love to give. All the love you have for Sirius and Remus and Marlene. All the love you have for all of us, you have plenty of love to go around. So if you find someone someday, they don’t have to be your one, but they can be someone you love. It doesn’t mean you love Regulus any less. If you find someone else someday, that would be okay. If you don’t, that would be okay too.”

‘There is no one else for me James. It’s only you.’

All that love for Regulus didn’t just go away when he died. It was still there, all of it in its insurmountable force, it just no longer had anywhere to go.

“I just worry about you being alone. You’re young. There are entire lifetimes for you to live, James. Don’t feel like you have to do it alone,” Dorcas added softly.

James tried to quell the anger he was feeling. He knew it was misplaced. He knew Dorcas didn’t want him to just move on from Regulus, she was coming from a place of love. But the thing was, James wasn’t alone. He had his friends, he had all of them, and he had Regulus. Burning bright every night without fail.

James left Marlene and Dorcas with lots of promises to call and to write when he didn’t call and to call some more.

“Don’t do anything stupid in Vegas,” Marlene said quickly, kissing his cheek.

James hugged Dorcas tightly.

Marlene and Dorcas had filled their home, their lives, with such joy and happiness. It was beautiful to be around, it was beautiful to experience.

“We want you back for three months in the summer,” Dorcas called as she waved goodbye.

Time passed.

When James arrived in Vegas, he could see immediately why Barty and Evan were drawn to it. There were slot machines in the airport. People in obnoxious Hawaiian floral pattern shirts. Glitter everywhere. It was loud, it was bright, it was a place that truly screamed Sin City.

“So, you sleep basically all day,” Barty was explaining. “And then lay by the pool because it’s fucking hot here. And then at night we go out.”

James looked around in awe. He was tired and a little groggy from the jetlag.

The house Barty was staying in was modern. It was massive, with large glass windows and a perfectly manicured green lawn. There was a glittering and expansive blue pool and a hot tub in the back with palm trees dotted everywhere. The fronds swayed in the warm, gentle breeze.

Everything inside the house was just as modern. Metallic chairs with minimalist and wavy arms, sleek staircases, neon glass fixtures.

“Barty, this place is great,” James encouraged, as Evan went in the kitchen to make drinks.

“I know,” Barty smirked. “It’s fucking incredible. This is where I’m hanging a Pollock or some shit when I get around to buying it and this is where Evan and I sleep,” Barty gestured to an open bedroom. There was no door, it was an open floor plan and James could see the giant California king sized bed that overlooked the glittering pool.

Barty and Evan.

Sleep.

Together.

In a California king sized bed.

“James? You alright?”

“Uhm, yeah. Yeah,” James blinked rapidly. “Yeah, I’m great. I just didn’t know you and Evan were, like, together. I-I mean, that’s great! I’m very happy for you both,” James stammered.

Barty arched both of his eyebrows at him.

“Uhm, how long have you been dating?” James was flailing.

“We’re married.”

“Shut the fuck up,” James let out a laugh but Barty just blinked calmly at him. “Barty. Shut the fuck up. No you’re not. I talk to you and Evan at least once a week. You said nothing. You’re not married to Evan. Fuck off.”

“Why do you sound so surprised? We’ve been together since New Hampshire.”

James tried to close his gaping mouth and Barty held up his hand to show a silver wedding band.

“Evan wanted rings,” He explained.

“Shut the fuck up. You and Evan aren’t together. No. You’re not. Evan! Evan,” James called, bounding through the house with Barty in tow.

He found Evan in the kitchen pouring drinks into three iced glasses.

“What the fuck’s got you all freaked out pretty boy,” Evan eyed him with concern.

“He’s being homophobic,” Barty shook his head. “He refuses to acknowledge our marriage.”

“Mariage,” James parroted, looking at Evan pointedly. “Marriage.”

Evan grinned broadly.

“Wait, I’m not– this isn’t why– I’m not homophobic. You do know that right,” James asked, spinning around to face Barty. “I mean, you just never said anything and now you’re married?”

“Show him the ring, Evan,” Barty prompted and Evan held up a hand with a matching identical silver band.

“We’re really married.”

“You both have so much fucking explaining to do,” James shook his head incredulously. “Start talking right fucking now.”

So Barty and Evan sat James down around their weirdly shaped, abstract, and modern kitchen table and kept his glass full of strong alcohol and talked over one another in excitement.

“We’ve been together since New Hampshire. We won’t bore you with the specifics but–”

“But you never said anything,” James interrupted Barty quickly. “Regulus had that meeting. We were all confessing! Marlene and Dorcas, Remus and Sirius.”

“But we weren’t together then…officially,” Barty amended under Evan’s glare. He cleared his throat, “But I mean after, it’s not like we tried to hide it. We were sleeping in the same fucking hotel rooms.”

“Did Regulus know?”

Evan snorted. “Yeah he knew. Just because we weren’t full on snogging all over the place like Remus and Sirius and we weren’t making cross eyes at each other like you and Regulus–sorry,” he added softly. “He knew.”

“I think you’re the only one who didn’t,” Barty grinned.

“No one ever said anything,” James cried indignantly.

“It was none of their business,” Evan snorted, taking a large drink from his glass. “You never asked Regulus?”

“It was none of my business! I just thought you two were…really close or something,” James mumbed and Barty let out a howl.

“Did ya hear that Evan? We’re just really close friends is all.”

Evan squinted his eyes. “Bit too soon for that joke, Barty.”

“Ugh. Still? We’re married,” Barty rolled his eyes. “Alright. Alright.”

“And now you’re married,” James asked looking between them. He couldn’t help the way his eyes drifted down to the silver metal rings on their fingers. “Why didn’t you call and say? We could’ve had a ceremony like we did for Marlene and Dorcas. We could’ve had presents and a cake and,” James trailed off as Barty and Evan turned more sombre.

“It uh,” Barty let in a sharp breath. “It didn’t feel right without him.”

“We didn’t want a big fanfare, you know? We’re not loud people. Well, we are but not when it comes to us,” Evan looked at Barty and smiled softly. “He would’ve wanted to do the decorations and the cake and everything.”

“He would’ve been my best man and it…it just wouldn’t have been right without him,” Barty nodded slowly.

“But, we got to Vegas and bought this house and lost a couple thousand gambling and made it all back also gambling and we spent a lot of time high and drunk and life is too short so we

said fuck it, and got married," Evan continued.

"No one proposed. It was a mutually agreed upon decision," Barty added.

"Well, Barty already had the rings. Both of them," Evan grinned.

"Because you wanted them! And then Elvis married us in a Vegas church," Barty cheered as he and Evan clinked glasses.

"Shut the fuck up," James repeated for what felt like the thousandth time.

"He looked like a very believable Elvis. He sang and everything," Evan nodded enthusiastically and Barty stumbled into the kitchen to grab a photograph off the fridge. He placed it in front of James.

It was a picture of both him and Evan kissing as an Elvis impersonator wearing dark sunglasses gave a giant thumbs up.

"I cannot believe it was bloody legally binding, but it was," Barty laughed.

Barty laughed and then Evan laughed and then James laughed too. He laughed so hard he had to wipe the tears from his eyes. Regulus would've fucking loved this.

"Well, we have to do something! You need to start with telling the others so they can send you gifts or their congratulations at the very least," James said, his cheeks hurt from smiling so much.

"We already have everything we need," Barty said. "But what do you think Evan? Should we tell the rest of them we got hitched?"

Evan shrugged. "Now seems as good a time as any. Sure." And then he pulled out his phone and started typing.

A few seconds later James felt his phone vibrate in his pocket and he took it out.

Evan had texted the entire heist group chat.

'Just thought you should know. We're with James and he thinks we should all tell you that Barty and I are married. Please send all your wedding checks to this address.'

Evan had attached two photographs. One of his Las Vegas address and another of him and Barty and Elvis.

Immediately, Barty and Evan's phones began ringing incessantly.

"Hm, we should probably answer those," Barty sighed.

Evan groaned, "Christ almighty, they're obsessed with us Barty."

"Truly," Barty grinned as Evan answered his phone.

James could hear Marlene's scream even though she wasn't on speaker and Evan stood up to excuse himself.

Barty's phone was ringing and vibrating on the table.

"Evan and I are going to be preoccupied for a little while," Barty said to James. "If you want to go outside and tell Regulus all about the good news. You can see him pretty well out here, especially if you stand at the base of the pool."

"How did you–"

"What? You think you're the only person who talks to Regulus like that? We're a pair of crazy fools, me and you, screaming up at the sky," Barty smiled, nudging his shoulder.

"But then, you've already told him?"

"No, Marlene we didn't purposely not invite you! We didn't invite anyone! It was a private ordeal! Yes, I know Elvis was there. But he was the only fucking one!" Evan sighed in the background.

"Oh, I most definitely already told him," Barty nodded. "But I think he'd like to hear it from you."

So Barty took a call from a disgruntled Lily and James went outside to sit by the pool and explain to Regulus all about the good news and the happy couple.

He was lucky the weather was warm and the grass was nice because he fell asleep out there, talking to Regulus and waiting for Barty and Evan to finish their calls. He woke the next morning to both of them splashing chlorine water on his face.

"Why didn't either of you wake me up," James groaned, every joint cracking as he stretched his sore back.

"Please, you were sleeping like a baby out here," Barty shook his head. "We got to you before the sun got too hot."

Time continued to pass.

James spent most of his days with Barty and Evan by the pool, drunk and at ease. At night he let them drag him to every club they loved, every casino they enjoyed, and every show they claimed was worth watching.

He learned how to play poker, he lost hundreds on roulette, and he spent several hours of his life on the slot machines. He tried every drink Barty and Evan handed him.

Barty and Evan both had plans to open their own club in Vegas, which is why they went out every night. They claimed it was research. James was just glad to be along for the ride.

Healing wasn't linear but the good days came more frequently and stayed longer than the bad ones. But the bad ones still happened. Somedays, Evan wouldn't get out of bed. Sometimes

Barty would get this far off look in his eye, and he wouldn't speak for a long time. Some nights, James couldn't bear the thought of getting into an empty bed.

But the bad days passed and the better days came again. All of them were necessary. These were the days that had to happen.

One afternoon, when they were all out by the pool, Evan posed the question. The same one most of James' friends asked him.

"What are you doing after this?"

In truth, James didn't know. He wanted to do something though. He couldn't keep doing this, bouncing around from friend to friend. He knew that they would be happy to have him. He knew that everyone would gladly make a room in their house for him, but they were moving forward. They were building lives. James wanted to do that too. He wanted to try.

Barty and Evan shared a look in the wake of James' silence.

"Listen, James," Barty sat up, eyeing him carefully. "Evan and I have been…we've been sitting on something. We were waiting for the right time to tell you and we think that maybe. We think that maybe now would be good. If that's okay."

James felt his heartbeat quicken at his slightly nervous tone. "What is it?"

Evan closed his eyes tightly and instinctively James held tightly onto the snake ring on his finger.

"When Regulus left, in Amsterdam," Barty began.

"Yes. I remember that," James said quickly, spurring Barty on.

"He was looking for a house. W-well he found a house, and he bought it. For you. For the both of you. It was supposed to be a surprise," Barty said quickly. "For after the heist."

James was blinded momentarily and once again all the air had been stolen from his lungs. He blinked quickly trying to get Barty's words to stick in his head.

"He gave us the address and the keys for safe keeping. He was worried that you might find them, because you were in the same hotel room. And we still have them and the house is yours," Barty continued.

"It's just, if you don't know what to do and where to go, and you want something new, and you want something that's yours," Evan stepped in, "the house is yours."

"I don't," James blinked again. "I don't understand. There's a house. He bought a house?"

"He bought a house."

"For us?"

“For you.”

“And you’ve known about it this entire fucking time and you never said anything? Why didn’t you say anything,” James asked, crying out in bewilderment. The hot desert sun was beating down on all of them. Tiny droplets of sweat were starting to form on his forehead.

“Because you were hurting and you were trying to heal and telling you all of this when you were in the worst part of mourning wouldn’t have been beneficial, trust me,” Barty explained quickly. “It would have hurt you more than it would’ve helped you. But, now. Now, I think it’ll help you.”

“Well where is it? Where is the house,” James sputtered out quickly.

Barty and Evan shared another knowing glance, before they spoke at the same time.

“Brazil.”

Time passed.

He was angry at Barty and Evan at first. He had cried. He had gone outside to yell at Regulus and he tossed and turned at night thinking about the house. The fucking house in Brazil. He yelled at Barty and Evan, he railed against them. He vowed never to step foot in Brazil and then told Barty and Evan he was leaving for Brazil that night. He called Remus and then Marlene and told them and while neither of them told him what he did or didn’t have to do, both of them came to the conclusion that looking at the house couldn’t hurt.

If it was too much, if it hurt more than it helped, James could always sell it. Or abandon it. They offered to go with him, but James knew this was something he wanted to do alone if he did it at all. He also knew there was no way he would ever sell the house Regulus had bought for them. There was no way he would abandon a place where Regulus had walked through the halls and thought of them. Where Regulus had seen the kitchen and thought of James. Of their life. Of their future.

James had spent the better part of a year bouncing around all of his friends' places. He stopped in on their lives, he saw their progress, he was privy to all their plans, and all their hopes for the future that were coming true. He had done this for over a year, and now, one day in the middle of Las Vegas, he was finally ready to make some plans of his own.

His and Regulus’ plans. Theirs. He booked a flight to Brazil. He thanked Barty and Evan profusely for their hospitality as he made his way to leave.

“Oh, and don’t be surprised when you start getting cash in the mail in a few weeks,” Evan said quickly from the door as James turned to leave. “It’s from me and Barty.”

“Cash,” James furrowed his eyebrows. “I don’t need any money.”

“It’s your cut,” Barty jumped in. “From the last four paintings.”

James paused, turning around quickly to look at Barty and Evan. He could tell by the looks on their faces that they were both being serious.

“You…you sold them? Both of you need to never be in charge of telling anyone anything ever again,” James spoke firmly. “What the fuck is wrong with the two of you?”

“Well, we picked them up that night. We couldn’t exactly leave them there for the authorities to find, could we?” Barty shook his head.

“We thought about it though. For a minute. Leaving them there and then maybe they’d think Lucius was behind the heist. But they’d go after Narcissa and Regulus wouldn’t have wanted that. He also never would’ve wanted Lucius to get the credit for something like that either. So we packed up the paintings and sold them to Selwyn,” Evan waved his hand as if they were talking about some menial thing and not highly important information.

“It was less than Regulus wanted for them, but we wanted to finish what he started, you know? His heist deserved to be completed.”

Evan cleared his throat. “It was the very least we could do for him after everything he’s done for us. The heist is done. He did it,” Evan finished softly.

“You’ll get your money in the mail, and so will everyone else, and you have a plane to catch, so get out of here,” Barty said, gruffly patting James on the shoulder. “And don’t think for a single second that we’re not coming to visit you in Brazil.”

Chapter End Notes

Barty and Evan are the lights of my life, but also, so CHAOTIC

Chapter 37: Brazil

Chapter Summary

This one hurts. I'd like to think it's a good kind of hurt though.

When James first saw the house, it was radiantly warm outside. The sun was casting everything in a golden glow which is why James could see in perfect clarity the red and green window shutters.

Did Regulus paint them himself? Did he pay someone else to do it for him? James could hear the water from the ocean. The birds chirped and the insects hummed peacefully.

When James first saw the house, he didn't go inside for two hours. He just sat outside, on the gravel with all of his bags, and he wept.

It had been over a year since Regulus died. A gruelling year where everything was completely and irrevocably different. He didn't celebrate things anymore. No birthday's, no Christmas, no New Years. Time passed, that was inevitable. But James wanted to acknowledge time passing without Regulus as little as possible. That's why he wasn't as upset as he should've been when Barty and Evan didn't make a fuss about their wedding, he understood what it was like.

Everything had changed in the year following Regulus, but when James stepped into that house, into their house, it was as if the past had been perfectly preserved and bottled up. There were boxes and boxes of Regulus' things. Everything he owned, he had shipped to the house in Brazil. James recognized portraits from the house in New Hampshire and rugs that had lined the hallways on the third floor. He went through boxes of Regulus' clothes that still smelled like him, and looked in the library at the piles and piles of books stacked high on the floor, not yet put on the shelves.

He half expected to hear Regulus' footsteps walking down the hall or to hear his voice calling out to him, asking James to bring him the box with the kettle for the kitchen. But James was met with only silence.

Everything about the house had traces of Regulus everywhere. Little glimpses of him, new parts of him that James got to have and hold on to, even though he was no longer alive. It took James several days to go through the entire house. Sometimes it got too overwhelming. Sometimes, it was entirely too much Regulus for there being none of him at all.

The first sticky note that James read was in the closet of the master bedroom. It was bright pink, and James had noticed them all throughout the house, but he couldn't bring himself to read them for two days. He saw Regulus' small, neat, curly writing on them in black ink and

he couldn't bear to read his words just yet. The one in the closet was easy enough. The bright pink sticky note taped to the bare white white wall. It was a four sentence phrase, one that made James smile through his gathering tears.

'Buy James nicer clothes.'

He read the first one and then, in a hungried frenzy, in a quiet desperation to have more of Regulus, he began walking through the house reading every sticky note, taking them down as he did.

In the bedroom.

'Let James put up one of his posters here.'

He then scratched out the one and put two.

On the wall in a hallway.

'Hang the portraits of me and James here.'

In the kitchen.

'Good countertops for dancing.'

'Buy oranges for James to make muffins.'

In the first spare bedroom.

'For Barty and Evan.'

In the second.

'Sirius and Remus?'

By the red and green shutters.

'You're welcome, James.'

On the window overlooking the front lawn.

'Plant a garden here.'

In the front entryway.

'Hang painting here?'

James imagined Regulus running around this house, jetlagged from the flight from Amsterdam and ridiculously tired with a pad of bright pink sticky notes and a pen. Regulus had accounted for everything. Every small detail of their new life and their new house was catalogued and planned. The only thing Regulus didn't account for, was the fact that he wouldn't be in it.

Slowly, very slowly, but surely, James began unpacking the house. He placed things where Regulus wanted them, where the sticky notes said things should go. He spent the most time in the library. He went through every single one of Regulus' books and flipped through the pages with delicate care. He didn't read a single printed word that wasn't underlined, circled, or highlighted, no. He was only interested in the inky black annotations that filled the books from cover to cover.

He traced his fingers over the lines, he savoured every thought Regulus had jotted down. What a privilege it was, to have these, after all this time. Remnants of him. He placed each book on the shelves in the library with delicate care after he had finished going through them until there were no more books left.

The house was coming together nicely. James opened all the windows. He let the light in. He played music while he worked his way through the rooms and the boxes. Sometimes he would even hum to himself.

When he finally got to the box in the sticky noted room marked 'Sirius and Remus?', he saw it.

Barely bigger than the size of a textbook, chalky blue-green pastels, pointed feet. The Degas. Was this the painting that Regulus wanted to hang in the front entryway?

He walked over to it, and as gently as he could, he picked it up, feeling the weight of it in his hands. If Regulus had wanted it in the front entryway, it most likely would have been all the other boxes in the front entryway. But it wasn't. It was in the room marked for Sirius.

James flipped the painting around to look at the verso and saw delicately a folded white letter addressed to Sirius carefully tucked into the back frame. He was tempted to read it. James wanted more than anything to read it. He wanted to hear Regulus' voice. His thoughts. He could imagine him much more clearly when he had Regulus' writing, but James didn't. He knew Regulus wouldn't have wanted him too.

The next day, after several back and forth texts from Barty and Evan, James went out and purchased the proper materials to pack the painting as securely as possible. He sent it off in the mail with a quick little prayer and a message to Sirius that read, *'I think this belongs to you. Regulus wanted you to have it. Check the back. James.'*

James continued working. The hardest thing was the garden. Planting Regulus' garden without him took several weeks. James had to stop, frequently. He filled it with horribly mismatched things. Lots and lots of purple flowers and then sunflowers and then he planted pumpkin seeds. Then he planted a bunch of white flowers with names he couldn't remember because he thought they looked nice.

He definitely should've asked Remus for help. Regulus probably would've appreciated a more cohesive garden, but James felt best doing it his way.

When he talked to Regulus at night, he was sure Regulus understood.

Eventually, all the boxes were unpacked, everything was placed and stored away, the garden was planted, the spare bedrooms were made. The portraits James and Regulus painted from their first official date hung side by side in all their bright and wonderful glory. Regulus had them varnished and framed. Everything had a place, there was just one more thing. James stared up at the pink sticky note. The only one he hadn't taken down yet.

'Hang painting here?'

There were no more paintings. James had no idea what Regulus was referring too and everytime he stared at the pink sticky note, he tried and tried to think of what was missing. What painting could it possibly be?

A month later he received a package from Sirius. When James opened it and sifted through the styrofoam packaging, he found a small statue bust of a boy. Sirius included a note.

'I'll trade you that Degas for this. I stole it from museum storage during the first heist I ever went on because it looked exactly like Regulus when he was younger. You should have it.'

James looked at the statue of the young boy smiling, his hair curly and styled just like Regulus', though it was a little shorter. He smiled fondly to himself and then he put it in the house, out on display in full view.

James took a long time to admire the house that day. It was their house with the Christmas shutters by the ocean and even though he wasn't there, Regulus had helped a tremendous amount in putting the entire place together. Their place. James had a plan, he had a sense of direction. It was still his and Regulus' future, and he would live it for the both of them.

When the purple flowers in the garden started to grow, James invited everyone to his house in Brazil.

Sirius cried when he first saw it. He didn't mean too, but he said it was the first time in a long time where he felt the presence of Regulus everywhere, rather than his absence. James felt that way too. Barty and Evan nearly cried when James told them that Regulus had picked out one specific bedroom just for them.

"What's with the sticky note," Marlene asked, gesturing to the front entryway.

'Hang painting here?'

"When I find out, I'll let you know."

Time passed.

James went to the beach, and filled the house with the scent of orange muffins. He learned Portuguese and took dance classes, he checked on the financial accounts everyday. He wrote to his mum.

The sticky note stayed up on the wall for a long time. Long after his friends left and resumed their lives. Long after the sunflowers sprouted up in the garden. Long enough, that James had

to go back and reinforce it with actual tape. Everyday he would stare up at it and everynight he would ask Regulus about it, until finally, everything clicked into place.

Two years after Regulus' death, he dialled Barty's number with shaky fingers.

"Hello?"

"Barty. It's James. I was wondering if you and Evan could help me with something."

—---

When Sirius received the package postmarked from Brazil, he wasn't entirely sure what to make of it.

Package was generous. It was a crate. James had called him and told him to expect something in the mail, but he never imagined it would be anything like this.

It was the Degas. It was his Degas.

His fingers, his entire body trembled when he took the painting out of its careful packaging.

It was beautiful, it was something he never thought he would see again, let alone this close. It was his. A final parting gift from Regulus.

Sirius followed James' instructions and flipped the painting over to see the folded letter on the back of the painting. It was tucked carefully into the gilded frame and addressed to him in neat, curly script.

He wasted no time in opening the letter and his eyes poured over the lines of text quickly. Once and then again and then again, and then he had to stop because he could no longer read through his tears, and then once his tears had subsided, he read it again.

'Dear Sirius,

The amount of letters I've attempted to write to you over the years, the months, the days where we haven't spoken could fill a library. I am writing to you now though, to tell you how sorry I am, for all of it.

I didn't take this painting out of spite, even though I tried my best to make you believe that I did. I didn't do it to take something from you, I did it to take a piece of you. So I could keep you with me. We weren't speaking, and I wasn't sure if I would see you anytime soon, but I remembered how much you loved this painting of the ballerinas. I remember how you could stare at it for hours, long after I was bored of it. I would try to stare at it just as long as you,

just to see it through your eyes– I always liked seeing the world through your eyes. I took it because I missed you.

I always meant to give it back to you, as a gift, as an apology, sometime in the future. I knew– I had to know, I had to have hope that one day, things wouldn't be bad between us. Maybe they would even be good. I knew that when that time came, I would give you the painting back. I wouldn't need it anymore, because I would have you, my brother, back in my life.

There have been several points in time where this painting almost didn't make it. Instances where it almost didn't survive, but I'm glad I saved it. Because it's yours. It's always been yours. You deserve to have it and you deserve to do what you wish with it.

I want you here, by my side, more than anything. I wish I knew how to tell you that without all the ultimatums and the false indifference. I wish I knew some better way to approach this, some better way so that I could redo this. But I don't. What I do know is this:

I love you. I miss you. I'm sorry.

R.A.B.'

When Remus arrived home from classes, he found Sirius in the same position on the floor where he first opened the crate, the letter still gripped carefully in his hands.

Time passed.

There were moments when freefall still felt like the only option for Sirius. Moments when he still felt as if the floor had fallen out from under him, but they were less frequent.

Remus was always there, too. He was always patient and kind and ready for whatever emotional rollercoaster Sirius was on that day.

They took walks together, with their dog, and tried new restaurants and made a bucket list and then crossed things off them. Sirius helped Remus study as best he could for exams and proofread all his papers for grammatical errors. He always kept his standing coffee date with Regulus the same time every week, no matter what city or country he and Remus were visiting, and he hung the Degas in their bedroom and didn't care one fucking bit if it looked out of place or not.

He sent the statue to James shortly after. It was packed away in storage, still untouched from the box Sirius had buried it in when he left home, but he had it, and he gave it to James for safekeeping. If anyone would appreciate it as much as he did, it would be James.

Time passed.

A little over two years after Regulus' death, Remus was sitting on the couch watching the news as Sirius was chopping vegetables in the kitchen, when something caught their attention at the exact same time.

Remus turned the volume up and Sirius walked into the room to get a look at the screen, knife still in his hand.

A blonde woman in red lipstick was speaking in a serious, informative tone.

'Authorities report that there has been a robbery at the Braxton Museum of Fine Art in the state of New Hampshire. The news of this robbery has been kept under wraps while authorities combed through the museum to assess the damage and catalogue all artworks within the building. After thorough investigation, authorities found that only one work had been stolen off the gallery wall. The painting, a sweeping seascape, is one of Aivazovsky's finest titled Gathering Storm. The International Art Crimes division is working with the proper authorities to track this piece which is believed to be somewhere in Brazil, but at this time they have no further leads. If you have any information pertaining to this crime, we urge you to call the number below. This shocking news, of course, comes after the event that is now known as the largest art heist in recorded history. Over two years ago, the Braxton Museum's sister branch in New York was ransacked allowing thieves to steal nearly a billion dollars worth of art. Another crime which still remains unsolved. These two robberies call into question the safety of museum security and the legal protocols in place to protect stolen works of art.'

—---

It took a long time, but James could say, that without a doubt, he was happy. Truly, genuinely, radiantly happy.

He attended Remus' graduation ceremony, and then his second graduation ceremony, and then his third. He got a job working at a small bookshop and once a month where he picked out a book he thought looked nice and read it to Regulus in the evenings before he added it to the library. He flew to Las Vegas every other month to see Barty and Evan. They came to Brazil on alternating months to see him. He went to Remus and Sirius' housewarming dinner party when they upgraded from their flat to an actual home. He brought them a plant from Regulus' garden as a present. He rode Vespas down the cobblestone streets of Italy with Marlene and Dorcas. He bought paintings from Mary and Lily and went on business trips with them to handle their finances. He was the best man at Remus' wedding, and he only cried three times. He swam in the ocean, he danced on spacious countertops in his kitchen, he listened to hours of horrible electric guitar. He went to every museum he could think of, saving all his thoughts to tell Regulus. He opened the windows, he let the sunlight in, he danced in the rain, and he was happy.

Time continued to pass.

He never did fall in love again.

—---

Years after– after all the laughter and the friendship and the joy, neighbours and children would still talk.

They would tell stories of a kind, but strange old man, who always handed out orange muffins and who grew sunflowers in his front yard. They would tell stories of a man who wore a giant silver snake ring and who talked to the sky and who's bright laugh could be heard from down the street. A man who had a strange painting of a boat, out on a wavy sea that you could see every time he opened the front door to his house. They would tell stories of the kind, but strange old man who lived in the house with green and red shutters.

Chapter 38: Epilogue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

James is in a strikingly white room. It dazes him a little bit and he has to blink to adjust his eyes to the sudden brightness. Everything feels clean, and light here.

He takes a minute to look around the room that he now finds himself in. There's a hallway off to the side, and he has a pulling sensation in his heart, like he's meant to go down there.

Briefly, he glances down at his hands. They're no longer gnarled and wrinkled, and riddled with arthritis, but they are strong and sturdy. Regulus' ring still firmly resting on his finger. He was young. He was so incredibly young again, no more than twenty-five. He wasn't sure how he knew this, but he knew.

His heart tugged in the direction of the long white hallway again, and this time James listened.

At the end of the hall, there was a large room. One side was completely covered in doors. Doors of all shapes and sizes and colours. They were lined up side by side down a seemingly never-ending wall that stretched on farther than James could see. But the centre of the room he cared about the most. The centre of the room was all James could focus on. Because there, in the centre of the dazzling white room, sitting on a bench, was a boy. A boy with a curly head of hair who was studying The Gathering Storm painting by Aivazovsky.

"Regulus," James breathed out. His voice echoed around the room.

Was it a question? A fact?

Regulus turned his attention from the painting to smile at James. Oh, how James loved when he smiled like that. It had been a lifetime since James had seen a smile like that.

His heart was tugging and tugging in his chest, urging him forward, towards Regulus, and all at once in a clash of limbs, Regulus was in his arms and James was holding him again.

Finally.

Finally.

Finally.

James' heart sang with every beat.

We're home.

He buried his face in Regulus' curls and wept. He kissed his forehead and the bridge of his nose and his chin and his lips and he held him some more.

James didn't know where exactly he was. He didn't care. Time wasn't real here though, he knew that. It was like a dream, but James also knew that it wasn't a dream at all.

"Come sit with me," Regulus whispered, taking James gently by the hand and pulling him over to the Aivazovsky. "Do you want some tea?"

James looked around for a kettle or a stove. "Regulus, I don't think that–"

But before James could finish, Regulus placed a cup in his hand.

"You can do stuff like that here," he said, as if that explained anything.

James took a drink from the warm cup. It was better than anything he'd ever had. He fought the urge to weep out of sheer joy again.

Regulus was dead. He had been dead for a long time. So if he was here, sitting next to James in such a tangible and real way, then that must mean that James was–

"Yes," Regulus nodded. "You are."

James wasn't scared though. He felt entirely at peace.

"You waited for me," James asked, not tearing his eyes away from Regulus. His lovely face, his soft freckles, his same beautiful smile. His Regulus.

"Of course I did."

"But Reg, it's been so long."

"Not for me. For me it feels like yesterday," he brought James' hand up to his lips and kissed it gently.

"This whole time," James breathed out in wonder. "This whole time I was talking to your star when you've been here."

Regulus hummed. "I was there too. Don't worry, love."

There were so many things James wanted to say, so many things he wanted to tell Regulus, but he had a feeling that Regulus already knew everything. It was comforting to be so understood without having to say a single word.

"So, where do we go now," James asked after a minute, or a year, or a century. "Do we stay here?"

His tea was still hot.

"No," Regulus smiled fondly. "No we go through there," he nodded to the doors. "But don't worry, we can leave whenever you're ready."

James leaned in to kiss him. He just couldn't help himself. He never could when it came to Regulus.

"What's through those doors?"

"Possibilities. You and me and a million different lives all scattered throughout the cosmos. Lifetimes."

James eyed the doors warily. He wasn't sure he wanted to give up this lifetime yet. This one and all it's spectacular memories.

"I'll let you in on a little secret," Regulus whispered standing up and leading James to the row of doors. "I've had a long time to look through some of these doors. A long time to look at the lifetimes we still have waiting for us, and you're going to love this one," Regulus pointed to a short brown door with a golden handle. "It's one of my favourites too."

James still wasn't convinced.

"You want to know another secret, James? Out of all the doors I've looked in, I've yet to find one where we don't meet. We always find each other, you and me."

"In every lifetime?"

"In every one."

Somehow, James knew this was true.

"Pinky promise," James asked, holding out his pinky finger.

Regulus looked at his outstretched hand for a minute lovingly before linking James' finger in his own. He felt the love of all their lifetimes, past and present and future wash over him as Regulus looked up at him with a glint of excitement in his grey-green eyes.

"Pinky promise."

Chapter End Notes

I just want to say that I am so incredibly grateful to each and every single one of you who read this story, commented, left kudos, all of it <333 everyone has been so incredibly supportive and kind throughout this entire fic writing process and it has truly been one of the most fun experiences I've had!

Thank you again, you beautiful, beautiful humans <33

Works inspired by this one

"A happy ending was imperative." - E.M. Forster by ItsAWonderfulLife

dancers (degas) by verwqndlung

Art Heist, Baby! by KrisKikstorky

Golden Days of Yore by apricusapollo

[Restricted Work] by calamitoustide

Breakout! by sincerely_bubbles

A work in an unrevealed collection

A work in an unrevealed collection

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